

By the same Author

BLUE WATER
THE WAYWARD NYMPH
CAVALIER OF CRIME
DEVIL'S BROOD
HANGMAN'S HONEYMOON
THE MAN THEY COULDN'T KILL
DARK ROAD TO DANGER
THEY STOLE A SHIP

EIGHT WENT CRUISING

HEDLEY BARKER



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CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
1 CARNATION FOR MR. WIX	7
2 OWNER	21
3 NINE FOR BREAKFAST	25
4 CONVERSATION ON DECK	32
5 LIGHT ON MR. PUCKLE	39
6 VISITOR FOR HERBERT FRENCH	46
7 EARS TO HEAR	49
8 CROOK STORY	57
9 WITH THE MASK OFF	62
10 CORRESPONDENCE FOR CAPTAIN SALE	70
11 MR. BRINDLE MAKES A RUG	77
12 MR. BRINDLE IN THE DANCE	82
13 MR. PUCKLE PHILOSOPHIZES	91
14 BLACKMAIL	100
15 TWO BRANDIES	107
16 TERROR FOR MR. PUCKLE	111
17 SURVIVOR	123
18 IDA DISPOSES	131
19 HAPPY BIRTHDAY	136
20 MR. BRINDLE TÊTE-À-TÊTE	149
21 BRIGHT LIGHTS	156

CHAPTER	PAGE
22 SHOCK FOR ALBERT SIMS	163
23 HOME FROM THE SEA	169
24 PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL	175
25 LAST WILL	180
26 THUNDERSTORM	185
27 MIDNIGHT INTERVIEW	193
28 BITTER-SWEET	198
29 NEWS FROM ENGLAND	203
30 A PARTING AND A MEETING	211
31 AT SEA	215

CHAPTER ONE

Carnation for Mr. Wix

1

ENTRANCED, entirely withdrawn from his surroundings, Mr. Wix bent an absorbed and affectionate glance upon her lovely breasts, her sculpted hair, her graceful limbs all golden and brightly beaded as she rode up from the embrace of the sea. Mr. Wix rode up with her; like her, he paused for a moment in mid-air. And then, with infinite delicacy, the enchanting creature sank feet first into the water, allowed it to circle her neat waist, paused as before, and soared wingless to greet the sun with her never-changing smile.

Vague thoughts jostled lazily against each other in the mind of Mr. Wix. The world was for the moment unreal with a trembling beauty which he knew must presently vanish away; the world had become a Paradise in which he and a golden goddess communed alone. Standing there in the very eyes of the yacht he clung desperately to the fiction that she was alive, that heart-beats informed her delectable shell, that her secret smile might yet blossom to its full ripeness. And whilst he toyed wistfully with this happy fancy there appeared fleetingly on the screen of his memory the pictures of other and lesser ladies, old flames and mere acquaintances, girls who were a part of the long-ago, the Dorothys and the Dianas, the Jennies and the Jeans of a long-dead yesterday. Mr. Wix considered them, and slowly shook his head. A connoisseur of the female form, he saw their shortcomings. Alone on this June morning he had met perfection and found regret. Man-created, that secret smile was immutable, a dead pattern for living lips. The goddess was of wood, her skin gold-leaf, her sculpted hair moulded to the hand of the carver. Mr. Wix, with a

deep sigh for the unattainable, turned about, and faced the bridge.

His head was bare, it was massive, well-shaped, and covered with crinkly white hair. The face underneath the broad forehead was handsome, pink and unblemished as a flower, rather plump, with benevolent brown eyes, a neat moustache, and a smallish retroussé nose. In conjunction with the important brow one would expect to find the eyes of Orion flanking a nose of some weight; but the eyes were those of a sleepy bulldog, the nose that of a little boy. Beneath the trimmed moustache, two red cushions of lips, a chin framed in fatness and dimpled in the centre.

Adjusting himself to the motion of the ship, Mr. Wix began to move aft. He was vast, he was sixteen stones of power and glory, and his vastness was contained in a dandified neatness of blue serge. His hands and feet were pretty, they were fantastically small (his feet would go comfortably into a six shoe), and despite his bulk he walked with a nifty delicacy, a slick jauntiness that made him very much of a fat fairy. As he came beneath the bridge he looked up, saw through the open window the flash of a gold tooth under a Captain's cap, and raised his hand in a dignified salute.

"A lovely morning, sir," he said.

"Topping," returned the Captain. "Grand day to get married on. Would you care to come up, sir?"

Mr. Wix looked around him and spotted the bridge-ladder, set his foot on it fastidiously, like a cat. He noted with some surprise the name *Aphrodite* on a lifebelt hanging from the upper structure. What happened yesterday? How did he come to be aboard this yacht? It was a matter for some regret with him that large and unnumbered chunks out of his forty years of life were completely lost. The attempt to focus on the details of yesterday met with no success, and as his face rose above the level of the bridge-deck he gave it up and grasped the waiting hand of the Captain.

"How-do-you-do, sir? I'm Captain Sale."

"How-do-you-do, Captain. So this is the *Aphrodite*? Very nice ship."

"Clinking," said the Captain. Mr. Wix gravely considered the flashing gold tooth, the spotless linen, the powerful hands. Captain Sale wore the aspect of a sun-beam and the authority of a Pasha. His round baby face twinkled and shone with innocent hilarity. A big man, thick in the arms and legs, with quizzical pale blue eyes and sandy lashes. He added: "Oh, yes, she's a ship all right. No cockboat. Seven hundred and fifty tons. You a good sailor, sir?"

"Am I? That's for you to say, Captain. This is my first sea-trip. The very first."

"Go on? Well, you're not doing so badly then." Captain Sale stretched out a pointing hand towards the starboard quarter. "Plymouth. Another two or three hours and she'll be doing her stuff in the Atlantic."

"The Bay of Biscay?"

"That's right, we've got that to come."

"I've heard about it. By the way, I'm Mr. Wix. Sorry I didn't mention it."

"That's all right, sir. And this is my first officer, Mr. Brindle."

Mr. Brindle put out a hand apologetically. A shy man, retiring, speaking almost in a whisper, and Mr. Wix wondered at the sardonic Fate which had rigged him out in a seaman's uniform.

"Thirty," chuckled Captain Sale, with reference to Mr. Brindle, "and never been in love. He's been loafing—eh, sir?"

"Neglecting himself," said Mr. Wix, with a faint smile. "Er—I'm a little bit hazy—you understand? Nerves. Shocking state. Could you tell me what day it is?"

"Tuesday, the twenty-fifth."

"June, of course," said Mr. Wix, without confidence.

"June, sir, that's right."

"And where are we going?"

Captain Sale gave Mr. Wix a curious glance. "Bound for the East, sir, I understand. Aden, Bombay, Colombo, the islands."

"Ah. The mysterious East. Tropical moons and palm-trees. Very nice." Mr. Wix faced aft and surveyed the snowy decks, enlivened by glittering brasswork. At the back of his mind seethed the hazy jumble of the immediate past; taxis, barmaids, pound notes all sued for his attention through a thick veil into which he earnestly peered, seeking to identify faces and recall incidents. There was nothing new in his failure to lay hands on vanished time; he was used to it, and the explanation was sure and steadying like the touch of an old friend on his arm. This was a binge. It had begun, like the others, with a double whisky for breakfast. How long ago? Suddenly, his shoulders began to shake with quiet laughter. A yacht. Aden, Bombay, Colombo, the islands. Where would he wake up next?

"Rather jolly," he said, turning to face the Captain.

"Grand," agreed Captain Sale.

"Adventurous. Life, I mean. That's what I like about it." His arm described a wide and dignified arc. "One long adventure. Where's everybody? The people, the passengers. I suppose there's somebody else?"

"Oh, yes, sir, there's somebody else. They won't be about yet. It's only six o'clock. Let's see, there'll be five besides you—six, counting Lady Eleanor Sarre."

Lady Eleanor Sarre? Mr. Wix passed a hand over his eyes. High society, a sumptuous yacht behind which stood the implications of millions.

"Have I met her?" he asked.

If Captain Sale felt surprise he concealed it. Mr. Wix added:

"Is she the owner?"

"Oh, no, sir. Mr. Dunne's the owner."

Mr. Wix's face remained a blank. Dunne? He had never heard of the chap. And then, catching the eye of

the Captain he was suddenly chuckling again. "Forgive me, Captain. Nerves, old boy, nerves. Shocking thing, shocking. By the way, that's a pretty girl you've got on the front of the ship?"

"You mean the bows, sir. That's our figurehead. Aphrodite. Goddess of love."

"Is she really? And very nice too."

Mr. Wix turned, descended six steps of the ladder. His head level with the Captain's feet, he faced about.

"Think I'll go and investigate," he said. "See you again, old boy, see you again."

2

Mr. Wix walked aft. He carried with him a magnificent constitution and great physical power. Now in the third week of his lapse, he looked out upon the world with an amiable stupefaction. It seemed very pleasant; a bright, flashing morning with moderate seas in the English Channel, and the last remnants of coast-line clear-cut and shining in the sun. Also, the yacht. Stupefied as he was, he could yet realize that he was disporting himself in circles of wealth and exclusiveness. He found it very attractive. Jolly, that's what it was, a diverting and agreeable adventure. At this juncture there peered through the fumes which bedevilled his memory the face of his doctor. *Quite literally, Wix, you're killing yourself. I should give up the hotel business if I were you.*

He paused. Was this the stairway up which he had come? Bannisters of polished mahogany set against a contrasting wood of great beauty. Thick carpet stretching away along a corridor. Mr. Wix had thought that he knew about carpets. As his feet cushioned themselves springily in this one he realized his mistake.

The corridor was lined with the same beautiful wood, yellow, gleaming, with a cloudy grain. On either side of the corridor were doors with silver handles. There was a

pleasant warmth in the air; the whole thing—the noiseless progress on the springy blue carpet, the rich wood, the silver fittings, the warm air—all this tended to emphasize and underline luxury. Also it tended to make him laugh, and he did laugh, shaking his shoulders with immense dignity, and looking, for all his dignity, just like a mischievous little boy.

So he stood, when a door immediately on his left opened inwards. Mr. Wix was no longer laughing, no longer alone. He drew himself up, put his heels together, inclined himself gently from the hips.

“Madam!” he said.

3

No, not beautiful, not (Mr. Wix thought) in the same street as Aphrodite, but decidedly striking. He saw a most brilliant ash-blonde, with high cheekbones, eyes that had length rather than width, a complexion pure and pale as a meringue, and lots of humour in a widish, curving mouth. Behind the folds of a jade-green velvet dressing-gown he divined a superb figure. He said:

“I beg your pardon. Did I disturb you?”

Kay French knew how to smile. But this smile, far from being professional, was a flash of pure fun.

“Oh, no. I heard you laughing, and I thought I’d ask you the time.”

“Five minutes to seven.”

“Oh. Then it’s early yet. Breakfast isn’t until nine. And I’ve got an enormous appetite. Have you?”

“Why, yes,” agreed Mr. Wix, “I believe I have.”

“It’s the sea air,” she said with confidence. “It does things to your alimentary tract.”

“Does it? That’s fine.”

“I simply adore cruising. It brings out all the worst in me.”

“Surely not.”

"Literally. It stimulates my sense of irresponsibility. Do you know what I mean? I do the maddest things. For instance——"

Behind her a bell tinkled. Abruptly she seized Mr. Wix by the arm, drew him inside, closed the door.

"Coffee," she explained. "When the bell rings, it's ready. I adore gadgets. Do you take cream?"

A little bewildered, Mr. Wix sat down. Stockings, a pair of corsets, two bright yellow butterflies sleeping on two black satin garters. He chuckled joyously.

"Do let me share the joke," she begged. "Or is it private?"

"Oh, no," said Mr. Wix, "not private. Just a thought. How lucky it is to be a butterfly. No offence?"

"Good heavens, no."

"Very nice of you," muttered Mr. Wix. "Perfect stranger, and you took me in. Are you Lady Eleanor Sarre?"

She laughed, a sound of pure joy. "Do I look like Debrett? How thrilling. And how disappointing for you. I'm Kay French."

"No, no, no. Not disappointing. The reverse. And I'm Mr. Wix."

About to pour out the coffee, she stared hard:

"Why, of course. Mr. double Wix, isn't it? Well, this is a coincidence!"

He sat up. "You don't mean to say we've met before?"

"Broxley. The Red Lion. Don't you remember? You were immensely dignified, quite the courtier. And you asked us to have a double Wix—two doubles in one glass. I played the piano, and you wept a little. Lily of Laguna, over and over again. Divine, you said, no music like that. And then you showed us the high kick with a tray. Bobby Stowe held it, and you kept saying higher, higher. You were ever so graceful. It was just like ballet. A lovely experience. It was all so delicious, and improbable, and rather fantastic. We stayed to supper and danced

on the lawn and drank buckets and buckets of champagne."

"Did we?" said Mr. Wix, wistfully. He shook his head. Gone, all gone. He would never remember. But one thing had now become clear in his mind, and he gave voice to it.

"The Red Lion," he muttered. "Lovely house. And the grounds—beautiful. I've just sold it. Everything, down to the last pair of garden shears. Nerves, that was the trouble. Doctor's orders. Wix, he said, your nerves are killing you. If you don't get out—so there it was. No pity, these doctors, no pity at all."

"What a shame," said Kay French. Lovely white hands pouring out coffee. A sense of sanctuary and beatitude. Mr. Wix relaxed and was grateful.

"Will you forgive me?" he said.

"Forgive you?"

"Lily of Laguna. Supper, and dancing, and buckets of champagne. It was a successful evening?"

"I shall never forget it."

"And I," said Mr. Wix, sadly, "shall never remember. Tell me, my dear, did I dance with you?"

"Like an angel."

"It couldn't have been long ago?"

"Oh, no. Last summer. I'd planned to go back there. But it won't be the same now. No Lily of Laguna. No dancing on the lawn, no high kicks. I don't mean that dancing on the lawn will be forbidden, or that I can't play Lily of Laguna if I want to. Or even that I couldn't find someone who would do high kicks for me. But it wouldn't be the same without you."

"Thank you, my dear. You're very kind. And I really danced with you? Amazing."

"What is?"

"Life. Full of surprises. You meet a perfect stranger and find out the next moment that she's an old friend. But it's disappointing too. It must have been a red-letter day when we danced together."

"For both of us. I adore dancing. More than anything.

else at that moment I wanted to dance. And one so rarely finds the perfect partner."

Mr. Wix sighed. "I'd no idea," he muttered. "Nobody ever told me I was anything but a perfect fool. A fool to myself, and a trial to my poor old father. And, as I say, it's disappointing not to remember. Where are all my lovely days? Eh? God knows. I don't. They might as well have happened in my sleep."

She looked at him as he drank his coffee. His face was remarkably fresh. The eyes were lively; there was no mark of the debauchee about Mr. Wix, nothing to indicate that he was a heavy drinker. But when he did drink, he drank, not like a fish, but like a forty horse-power suction pump. True, he had long periods of sobriety. But the intervening spells of hearty tippling, lasting as they did for three or four weeks with little or no food, were damaging to his liver and ruinous to his pocket. Sober as a Methodist after ten or twelve double brandies, he would walk home in dignity with several bottles of whisky in an attaché case, take a bath, put on a change of linen, and draw a fresh cork with relish. Only his mind got drunk. And, drunken, it functioned only in part. Like a camera without a plate, it received the impression of the moment but made no record of its shape.

So that Mr. Wix was apt to find himself in the oddest possible situations without any clue as to how he had arrived in them. And now, approaching normality once more, he was anxious to establish some kind of continuity between past, present, and future.

"Why can't you remember?" asked Kay French.

"Nerves, my dear, nerves," said Mr. Wix, gravely. "Terrible. You've no idea. Gets you into no end of fixes. For instance, I wake up this morning on a yacht. God knows how I got here. And I'm not going to worry, anyway. Why should I? Stupid. Just let things rip. May I have another cup of your very nice coffee?"

"Do you really like it?"

"Perfect," nodded Mr. Wix. "Everything's perfect. Very happy to meet you, Miss French, very happy indeed. Who knows? Perhaps we may dance together again."

"We must. I'd love to."

The coffee was clearing his head. Peering back through the faint mists of time he saw a bowler hat canted at a knowing angle, the sharp face of the auctioneer. Six thousand I'm bid, gentlemen, six thousand pounds for this very desirable property. And then the cheque. How will you have it, sir? In fives, tens . . . ?

"I'm sorry," he said, "I sold the place at Broxley. Spoilt your fun. Things can never be the same again. Never."

"It was all," said Kay French, "so spontaneous and gay. There was a sort of beauty about it. But perhaps that was the champagne? "

"I behaved myself? " asked Mr. Wix.

"Like a gentleman."

He got up, gave a meticulous little bow, sat down again.

"Thank you. That was my father's wish. Through thick and thin, son, a gentleman—that's what he used to say. Poor old dad. He's a property owner. Wears a horseshoe in his tie, side-whiskers, one of those collars that look like ploughshares. Houses and houses and houses. But that's neither here nor there. This yacht. Mr. Dunne's, isn't it? All very expensive. Is he a millionaire? Don't remember meeting him at all."

"Oh, no," said Miss French, "he isn't a millionaire. In fact, I believe he's very poor."

"Poor? " Mr. Wix shook his head. "I don't get it."

"This yacht was left to him."

"Very likely, my dear, but he's got to run it."

"Not exactly. We're running it."

"We? "

"The passengers. We all paid four hundred pounds for the trip. It was advertised. Didn't you see it? But of course you must have done or you wouldn't be here."

"That seems reasonable," said Mr. Wix. "And who are the others? I've only met you."

There was a knock on the door. It opened to let in the steward. The steward was brisk, bustling, efficient, spry, with an impish look in his two bright eyes. He bore with him a silver tray carrying tea and biscuits.

"I'm so sorry, steward," said Kay French. "Coffee, you see. I ought to have mentioned it last night."

"Not at all, madam. It's a pleasure. Good morning, sir. Perhaps you'd like the biscuits?"

"I'd love the biscuits. Thank you so much."

"Steward," said Mr. Wix. "About breakfast. I'd like a grilled sole. Do you think——"

"Certainly, sir. I'll see to it. Leave it to me. Nine o'clock breakfast, sir. There'll be a warning bell at eight-forty-five."

4

Mr. Wix nibbled a biscuit. Clarity was returning. He was beginning to adjust himself. Beyond all dispute he had paid for his passage on the yacht *Aphrodite*, now bound for foreign parts. And here he was, *tête-à-tête* with one of the nicest girls he had ever met. It was a good start. Things couldn't have fallen out more happily. And whilst he listened, Kay French talked. Words bubbled out of her with the happy inconsequence of a spring. She sparkled. She filled the cabin with gaiety, and she filled the heart of Mr. Wix with chuckling tremors.

"I can only describe them sketchily," she said, with reference to the passengers. "Can you get the idea of a dove-grey suit, a tiny hat of white kid with red piping, a red parasol, and white shoes with crimson laces? That's Lady Eleanor Sarre. Slim? Mr. Wix, she's lovely. And she walks like a Narcissus."

"I didn't know a Narcissus——"

"It doesn't. But it carries itself. Proud beauty. Charm.

Do you know what I mean? I tell you she's lovely. A fragile little duck."

"I like ducks," said Mr. Wix. "Is she young?"

"Not young, no. But I shouldn't think she'd ever grow old. And she's an aristocrat. A real one. Finer clay, and all that."

"You're a rather special line in clay yourself," suggested Mr. Wix.

"Am I? Well," said Kay French, "the potter didn't try very hard. And then there's Mr. Puckle, with a sharp nose like a scythe, and darting black eyes, and neat little ears, furtive ears—do you know what I mean? He's pigeon-toed, and he bustles about and says well, well, well, in a breezy voice. Now let me see. Who's next?"

"Oh—Mrs. Weiss and daughter Ida. Mrs. Weiss booms; she's got three chins for a sounding-board, and her voice—well, it's astounding. She's got a bosom, too—enormous: you could just creep into it and get lost. She's like the gentleman in the Bible, her paths drop fatness. For the rest, she's about five feet ten and imperious as Boadicea."

"She sounds," said Mr. Wix, "rather terrific."

"Positively shattering. Daughter Ida, if you leave out her face, is rather lovely. Beautiful legs, perfect hips, all suppleness and bouncing health."

"What's the matter," queried Mr. Wix, "with her face?"

"Well, it isn't just plain, it's rather monkey-like. Very broad nose, a rather bulbous forehead, and peculiar lips. But there's something rather attractive about her eyes, and an extraordinary gaiety in her smile. Poor thing. I do feel sorry for her. Not that she's in need of pity. I rather believe she enjoys life. I had quite a conversation with her last night. Funny how people begin to tell you their life-stories the first time they meet you."

"I believe," said Mr. Wix, "I told you some of mine."

"Did you? I must look very motherly. And, by the way, you'll like Miss Letts. Languorous, with a very fetch-

ing jaw-line, and groomed like a racehorse. About thirty, I should think? I've left my brother till the last."

A cloud came over her face as she spoke about her brother. For a moment or two she was silent. Then:

"He's older than me by fifteen years," she said, in a more sober tone. "I'm afraid he's not very good fun, he doesn't seem at all like a French. And he's rather peculiar. Or shall I say unimaginative? He wears sponge-bag trousers and a black coat, summer and winter, day in, day out. Of course, he's ill—mentally, I mean. Don't misunderstand me, Mr. Wix—I don't mean that he's abnormal. But he broods. He never did take an interest in games, or the theatre, or any of the things that would normally appeal to a man. I think he must be dreadfully unhappy."

"*Cherchez la femme?*" suggested Mr. Wix.

"I think there *was* a girl. He's never told me anything about it—he isn't at all communicative. And then he hasn't been happy in his job. He was secretary to Andrew Harriwell."

"The millionaire chap who recently died?"

"Yes. Of course, he paid poor Herbert awfully badly, and it rankled. The number of hours he put in was really fantastic."

"He left him something in the will?"

"Not a penny."

"Tough luck. He seems to have had a very raw deal."

"He *has* had a raw deal."

She looked at Mr. Wix uncertainly, hesitated for a while. At last:

"I wonder if—if you'd do something for me. I've got no right at all to ask you. It's only that you seem so nice and comforting."

"My dear child," said Mr. Wix, "I'd feel honoured."

"It's a piece of audacity, really, to wish Herbert on anyone. He's frightfully heavy going. But I wondered if you could talk to him, take him under your wing."

Mr. Wix gently patted her hand.

"Leave it to me, my dear." He chuckled softly. "You've got a talent for description, for hitting people off."

"Have I?" She sighed. "Waste, sheer waste. I'm told I can act a bit, too. But I'm afraid of roughing it. Draughty stations and provincial lodgings—no, I simply couldn't face it. So I took the line of least resistance. I'm just a mannequin. A desperate bore, but the job's safe, the money's sure, and—well—there you are."

"Safety first?" Mr. Wix shook his head. "That's not your line at all. You should strike out. A girl like you—lovely, delightful. No limits, no limits at all."

She was suddenly irradiated. Her brilliant smile was all light and warmth.

"I'll think about it," she said. "Meantime, I'm wasting a nest-egg in high living. I'd saved a thousand pounds—needless to say, not out of my job. I made some very lucky investments. One gets stock exchange tips from the husbands of customers, and occasionally a good thing for the two-thirty. So, I did it in—the whole thousand, I mean. It was a glorious feeling. And I simply couldn't resist this trip. It really is luxury, isn't it? I'm afraid I'm an awful Sybarite. Of course, it was partly for Herbert's sake too. I thought that, with just a few people . . ."

"Herbert," put in Mr. Wix, "has got a very nice sister."

"Enjoyed your coffee?" she asked.

"I've enjoyed the whole experience. What was the word you used? Spontaneous. The whole thing's been spontaneous, and utterly charming."

He arose, enclosed her hand in both of his, gently shook it.

"My compliments and thanks," he said. "It's half-past eight. You'll want to dress."

He was by no means unattractive to women. As she looked at his face she laughed.

"Joke?"

"Not exactly. It's only you. You're rather——"

"Yes?"

She turned, took a carnation from a vase, slipped it into his buttonhole.

"Unusual," she said. "Good-bye."

CHAPTER TWO

Owner

1

MEANTIME, Michael Dunne was trying to get used to the feeling of yacht-ownership. Sudden translation from a motor showroom to the luxury of the *Aphrodite*—this sort of thing was understandable in a three-and-sixpenny seat at the Plaza, but somewhat fantastic in real life. Bliss moved him. The bliss was threaded through with uncertainty. There was, he felt, a snag somewhere. This couldn't last.

He looked at the silver bath-taps, the yellow tiles, the floor of shiny black rubber. The discreet noise of engines and the recurring tilt of his bath-water from port to star-board assured him of reality. It occurred to him that by simply speaking into the voice-pipe between saloon and bridge he could decrease the speed of the ship, cause her course to be altered, have her stopped dead. Couldn't he? Aloud, and with firmness, he said:

"I could."

He turned on the hot-water tap, sighed with complete content, and set out once more on an imaginary tour of the yacht. The paint shop, the bos'un's store, the lamp-room: pots of paint, brushes, blow-lamps, coils of new Manilla, caustic soda and holy-stones—were not these the very stuff of romance? Engine-room, stokehold, the entire apparatus for running the ship, from capstan down to the last napkin in the steward's pantry-drawer—all his, and

duly accounted for in several inventories. Glass cloths, six doz. Soap powder, five cwts. He had spent a couple of hours last night with those inventories. Entrancing! All the thrillers he had ever read were poor, bloodless things by comparison with these lists of cutlery, marlin-spikes, and pillow-slips.

He was thirty-one. Certainly he felt younger; the quality of the pleasure he now experienced was child-like, there was a feeling of brand-newness, leaping high spirits, a keenness for life such as he had never known. He had constantly to curb himself, lest by some silliness of word or deed he might advertise the fact that he was something less than a responsible yacht-owner.

He had travelled down to Portsmouth prepared to sell the *Aphrodite*, for he did not see how he could possibly maintain her. At the first sight of her he knew he couldn't bear to sell—at least, not yet. All grace, and charm, and airy lightness she sat upon the water like some bonny white bird preparing to take wing, and even whilst the valuer was estimating her worth in pounds, shillings, and pence by his side, Dunne was saying to himself: "I cannot, I will not sell."

When he announced this decision Mr. Black said:

"You're not going to keep her laid up?"

"I don't know. I want time to think."

"Excuse me, sir, but in this case thinking will cost you money. Every day she lies here there'll be harbour dues to pay."

Dunne looked at the yacht. Was ever a ship more like a bride than this?

"Then I must pay them."

"Well, sir, you know best."

Vehemently, Dunne said: "It must seem idiotic to you. You know the circumstances, the papers saw to that. I'm just a car salesman. Can you tell me what it would cost to run her under steam?"

"You'll be lucky to get out under three hundred a week.

A rough estimate, of course, but I don't think you'll find it's far out."

Dunne laughed. The situation was ironic.

"A week! That represents about six months of my salary."

He returned his gaze to the yacht. A warm, windless afternoon with not a ripple on the face of the harbour. There she lay, the perfect expression of her designer's genius. Suddenly he put out a hand.

"Wish me luck, Mr. Black. If I do eventually sell, I'll remember you."

2

Dunne booked a room at the Marine Hotel. Here in the harbour was his love, and he could not so soon face a parting. For a week he day-dreamed about her decks, reviewed her entire length from the bridge, played with the engine-room telegraph, took the wheel in his hands, and (when the eye of the caretaker was elsewhere) fondly stroked her polished rails. Now and then he took the dinghy to pull slowly around, observing her from every angle, delighting in the aspiring sweep from forefoot to bowsprit, the rake of her funnel and masts, the felicity of her just proportions. All the time he was thinking hard, searching for a way out. The solution, when it did come, was simple.

His distant relative, Sir John Withers, having left him the yacht without sufficient income to run her, he advertised a trip in the yacht *Aphrodite* to the East.

"The yacht (so ran the text) is in every respect equipped for the convenience of the most exacting voyager. No expense was spared in her building to ensure the comfort of passengers. The arrangements to this end are sumptuous to a degree. Fare for the complete voyage, out and back, £400."

Within forty-eight hours he had eight replies. He read

them carefully, bade the writers repair on board in a fortnight's time, and called upon Mr. Black to provide a captain and a crew. His legacy from Sir John, quite apart from the yacht, amounted to twenty thousand pounds, and of his own personal savings he had fifteen hundred pounds at call. He was prepared to spend this, and even to dip into his legacy, so keen was he to steam the *Aphrodite*. Soon she would move away from the buoy under her own power, her fabric pulsing with delicate life. He awaited this moment with a febrile impatience.

3

And now he wanted to sing. Laughter bubbled up within him. Like a spring lamb he was informed with the leaping qualities of vigour and delight. But he contained himself. The man of thirty-one looked upon the lad of twelve with a severe and curbing eye.

He got out of the bath. From a long mirror a tall young athlete looked out upon him with a smile. The smile improved to a grin, the grin became a chuckle as he towelled himself to a glow. This was the moment for the dressing-gown by Hawes and Curtis; as the owner of a notable property he deemed it proper to cut a bit of a dash. Blonde, crisply-curling hair, crimson lapels, a crimson cord girdling black silk. He judged the effect to be rich, distinguished, the natural sequel to battles fought on the playing-fields of Eton.

And this reflection induced in his mind a train of thought which led back to his last great Eton and Harrow match, ending as it had done in tragedy. Both his parents had been killed in their car on the journey home. His father's affairs had been found to be in some confusion, and for Michael Dunne the notion of a commission in the Guards went by the board. It was a disappointment for which the prospect of commerce did little to compensate. However, once the situation was realized young Dunne

faced up to it, and for a number of years he had developed his talent as a car salesman with increasing success. He had that kind of charm which flutters susceptible hearts, and lady customers found themselves terribly unsettled by his smiling glance.

He stepped out into the corridor. The ship was alive, she quivered with equable movement, seeming to communicate her personal approval of the June morning. He responded to this message with ardour. The gods had given him much, they might offer even more. Optimistic, he turned into his cabin.

CHAPTER THREE

Nine for Breakfast

I

"DELIGHTED. Very happy indeed." Mr. Wix murmured rapturous greetings and dispensed neat little bows. Here were the ladies, and here was their cavalier. Bursts of laughter, sweet tinkling of feminine voices, the morning smell of cosmetics. Mr. Wix was warmed, he expanded into a sunbeam of benevolence. "Mr. French? How-d'you-do. My first voyage, the very first. Yours too? Then we're fellow-novices."

Mrs. Weiss sailed into the saloon like a full-rigged ship bursting with upper-deck cargo, claiming right of way, bearing down on Lady Eleanor.

"Say, I'm tickled to death to meet a real live ladyship, a member of the British aristocracy. Back in the States, you know, we've only gotten a phoney aristocracy, the aristocracy of money. Ida—meet Lady Eleanor. She's got roots way back with King John and the Domesday Book, and all those ancient relics of old England. Can you imagine that?"

Boom, boom. Lady Eleanor was caught up, carried away in a Niagara of sound. Mrs. Weiss was a wet talker. She splashed. Her pouting red lips opened and closed to fire tiny rockets of spittle.

" . . . Real wonderful to meet a scion of the old British nobility. And you look it, Lady Eleanor, if I may say so. Fragile, and patrician, and exclusive. And your complexion—it's class, it's pedigree. Perhaps you'll give me a line on skin foods later on? And we must have a really long talk, I'm mad on family trees and blue blood. Just fancy, Ida, Lady Eleanor's a direct link with Alfred the Great, and Runnymede—all those things you read about in history. Isn't that cute? "

Kay French said to Ada Letts: " You haven't met Mr. Wix? He's an old friend of mine."

Mr. Wix's eyes dwelt on raven-black hair, a lovely square jaw, full, smiling lips, a tea-rose skin, and he was convinced anew that man's greatest boon was woman. She wore a flashing green blouse, and a pearl in each ear, and a look of friendliness in each dark eye, and her shoes, and stockings, and pleated skirt of silver grey were the pink of perfection—Mr. Wix knew this, because he had observed her from afar. He said:

" I envy you, Miss Letts."

Her eyebrows arched to a swift smile. " Why? "

" You look as if you had an appetite for breakfast."

" You're right. I'm perfectly ravenous. Don't you feel up to it? "

" I did. I even ordered a grilled sole. But I begin to be uncertain."

" Don't think about it," she advised. " The great thing is to concentrate one's attention firmly on something else."

" Don't you put a key down your back for sea-sickness? " suggested Kay French. " Or is that for hiccups? "

" Neither," replied Ada Letts. " Look at the murals, Mr. Wix." She indicated the paintings which topped the long settees of grey kid on either side of the saloon. Done

in vivid colours, ultra modern in idiom, they presented scenes from foreign ports, the flora and fauna of tropical islands. "They're awfully able, don't you think?"

"My ignorance of Art," said Mr. Wix, "is colossal."

"And," suggested Kay French, "you're not interested, perhaps?"

Mr. Wix twinkled. "At the moment," he confessed, "no. Ladies first."

Whereat they all laughed, Ada Letts because of his naughty twinkle, Kay French because she always had laughter on tap, and Mr. Wix because he could imagine no situation to match the present one for enjoyable promise.

Basso profundo—Mrs. Weiss dominated by sheer lung power. Herbert French, looking utterly miserable on the settee, gazed at her with a gloomy fascination as she buttonholed Michael Dunne.

"What a shame you had to lose your beautiful home, Mr. Dunne—Bredon Priory was sure a historic monument, a landmark in history. I do think it's tough on all the ancient families having to sell up their ancestral halls. Why, Henry the Eighth stopped off at the Priory—Ida, this gentleman's forefather sat down at table with bluff King Hal—can you beat that?"

A voice spoke at Mr. Wix's elbow, low, husky, assured. Lady Eleanor, vivid like a flamingo, had the exquisite finish of a Tanagra statuette.

"May I? I do feel that I should get to know everyone before breakfast. It's so tiresome having to break the ice over eggs and bacon—they invariably cramp my conversational powers. Matter over mind, you see. Mr. Wix I've already met. Has he been saying nice things to you?"

Kay French introduced Ada Letts, beckoned Herbert French from his settee. He looked pale, and the paleness was intensified by his black coat. "This," said Kay French, "is my brother—Lady Eleanor Sarre," and Mr. Wix detected tenderness in her eyes, a swift welling-up of love, of pity which was gone like a flash. Herbert French

murmured a response; he seemed lost, remote, alone with some worry that preoccupied his mind. And his thin, lifeless hair, the haunted eyes magnified by spectacles, the dispirited moustache, unkempt, faintly flecked with grey—these things in conjunction with the oddness of sponge-bag trousers and black coat struck for Mr. Wix an unmistakable note of pathos.

Ancestral halls and Henry the Eighth. Mrs. Weiss roared like a mighty wind. "And wasn't Nicholas Dunne imprisoned in the Tower way back in sixteen-ninety-five? Say, what do you know about that, Ida? This gentleman . . ."

Ida caught the eye of Michael Dunne. Faintly smiling, faintly sardonic, she flashed him a wink.

"You see, I know all about you, Mr. Dunne—your newspapers took care of that end. And I look forward to some real, interesting talks with you. Ida would be just tickled to death to hear all about your old home—don't you remember Bredon Priory, Ida, in the stately homes of England?"

2

And now they sat down to breakfast. At each place was a yellow linen napkin-case inscribed S.Y. *Aphrodite* in blue. The table mats were of tooled green leather, the cutlery, with porcelain handles done with a tiny flower-motif, had been made by Swedish craftsmen. The richness of Spanish mahogany gleamed darkly like a lake, prisoning beneath its surface the shapes of the yellow blooms growing from the massive silver centre-piece. Mr. Wix made a note of the cutlery: this, he thought, was the pink of polite taste.

"Your sole, sir," murmured the steward. Vapours rose from his plate, his appetite was gently titillated, the motion of the ship seemed less vigorous. Mr. Wix crumbled his roll, caught the eye of Michael Dunne.

"Ah, good morning, sir. We haven't met?"

"Oh, yes, I think so. Last night."

Nonplussed for a moment, Mr. Wix made a good recovery. "Why, of course. Forgive me, sir. Nerves. I hope to recuperate. *I am recuperating.*"

"Good. I'm sure Lady Eleanor will do her best to help you. You'll find Mr. Wix a most entertaining companion, Lady Eleanor."

"I do. If I had a desert island, Mr. Wix would be my Man Friday."

Earnest blue eyes fixed him as Mrs. Weiss leaned forward.

"Neuropine," she said. "N-e-u-r-o-p-i-n-e." The letters, slowly spelled out, fell loud like gongs. "My late husband always swore by it for nerves."

"Thank you, madam. I'll make a note of it."

"Cyrus," offered the lady, "was a martyr. He was sacrificed on the altar of big business. Mom, he used to say, I'd give all my millions if only I could let up and relax, and get a bit of home life with my slippers and a cigar."

Lady Eleanor was suddenly rapt as she thought of home life, slippers, and cigars, of Colonel Justyn Sarre, who had been less than a husband and more than a brute. In riding-boots she could remember him, in brogues, and veldtschoen, and evening pumps, but never in slippers. Into her ear Mr. Wix murmured:

"Once, I had a George the Fourth sovereign. If I had it now I'd offer it for your thoughts."

"How nice of you," smiled Lady Eleanor, "not to measure them by pennies."

"You're not eating," he pointed out.

"Oh, yes, I am. That was a connubial interlude."

"Your husband couldn't get away?"

She laughed. "My dear Mr. Wix, he's an expert at getting away. A most elusive person. However, he belongs to an unpleasant past, and I'm simply revelling in the present."

Ida Weiss, with a curious glance at Herbert French, said:

"Feel kinda sick?"

The hunted eyes flickered to her face, returned to his plate.

"Oh, no, I—I'm quite all right."

"Hangover, maybe?"

Laughter, the busyness of conversation, the cheerful tinkle of knives and forks, the moments galloping away, and not one that Herbert French could count for pleasure. For a second of time he stared horrified at an inner vision of disaster. His smile was twisted and painful.

"No," he muttered, "not a hangover."

Again the curious glance. This guy, thought Ida Weiss, looks all in. He looks like he's just come from a funeral. Impelled by sympathy for a fellow-creature in distress, she persevered.

"Maybe it's private trouble. Don't think I'm inquisitive. You don't have to tell me a thing if you don't want. I thought maybe I could cheer you up."

Herbert French didn't reply for the moment. It was difficult to concentrate on what people were saying when something dreadful and demanding throbbed like a cancer at the back of one's mind. All at once he was back in Andrew Harriwell's house, pausing outside the library door with the tick of the hall clock loud in his ears and the very furniture waking to life in the tingling darkness. He shuddered. There was a look of fright in the glance which he flashed at Ida Weiss.

"You're very kind. There isn't anything I can tell you."

"That's too bad. A trouble shared is a trouble halved. I guess that's an easy platitude, but I'm not very clever with words. Don't you think this yacht's a swell outfit?"

Michael Dunne looked at his guests. A burst of laughter followed some remark of Mr. Wix's which he didn't catch. His eye fell on Herbert French, and he found himself disturbed. He wanted this trip to go smoothly; he wanted *Aphrodite* to carry a cargo of high spirits, harmonious good

fellowship, light-hearted camaraderie, and Herbert French looked desolate like a mourner. Confound the man!

But, looking at the remainder of the company, Dunne felt cheered. Lady Eleanor combined the dignity of a chatelaine with the grace of a coryphée and the high spirits of a kitten, and as he remembered their conversation of the night before he couldn't repress a quick grin.

"Mr. Dunne—Portsmouth is the most exciting place. I was nearly picked up. A man. He followed me."

A chuckle, a sudden light in eyes irresistibly playful.

"A bowler hat, a sandy moustache, an umbrella. He kept raising it—the hat, I mean. I just gurgled at him. I had to. He was a trifle fat, you see, and rather hopeful. And every time he caught my eye, off came his bowler."

"I can sympathize with him," Dunne had said. "You're rather disturbing. And what happened?"

"Oh, he just got dispirited, poor man. We passed right out of each other's lives. Still, I'm thankful to him. It made me feel ever so optimistic."

And Mr. Wix, completely vague, entirely fraternal. Mr. Wix had arrived with a man in breeches and leggings who punctuated his *sotto voce* conversation with profound winks.

"This is the governor, sir. I was to see him safely delivered on board."

"Quite right, old boy," nodded Mr. Wix. "Glad to meet you. Very great pleasure indeed."

He had pulled out a handkerchief together with a shower of five-pound notes. In the slipstream of the electric fan they took flight hither and thither, pursued by the man in breeches. More of them, from every pocket—scores, hundreds. Mr. Wix scrabbled them into a heap.

"Dross, old boy, dross. Now, what's the damage? Help yourself, will you?"

And at this juncture, with fits of laughter centring around Mr. Wix, Michael Dunne laughed too. They were

still laughing when the saloon door opened to let in briskness, bright eyes, a wide grin. Mr. Puckle had the nifty feet of a tap-dancer, the beautiful white hands of an expert manipulator of life, and the kind of hook-nosed face that can look like black mischief. Just now it beamed with the frank gaze of a rising sun as he advanced to his place at table. In the accents of New York his penetrating voice approved of the room and the guests.

"Say, this is swell! How are ya, folks? Guess I overslept."

Mr. Puckle sat down, shook out his napkin, was dazzled by a brilliant glance from Kay French. He waved a sportive hand.

"Hello there. Guess I'm late. Gotta make up for lost time. Yes, sir! "

CHAPTER FOUR

Conversation on Deck

1

ON DECK the air was dazzlingly clear. A single bank of clouds, white like soapsuds, sailed placidly under the prospering sun, and the sportive seas, broken up into small tussocks, butted each other playfully as they ran hither and thither in a flurry of cream and green. The breeze had failed to the lightest zephyrs; the vast blue dome of the sky seemed to express a smiling peace—altogether it was a day to lift up the hearts of men with gladness, and as Mr. Wix lit his after-breakfast cigar he felt that indeed everything was working together for his good in the best of all possible worlds.

He had just come from his cabin where he had been trying to reduce the chaos of his recent days into some sort of order. He had, for instance, been counting the rather

surprising total of banknotes which he had found stuffed into the pockets of his coat and trousers. Together with his small change, they made a grand accounting of two thousand four hundred and fifteen pounds, three shillings and eightpence ha'penny. His shoulders shook. His stomach muscles quivered in flex and reflex as he chuckled at the sheer lunacy of things. Harking back, he remembered again the sale of the Red Lion, after which came a blank. He must have cashed the cheque. Where did he go after that? Fishing in the pool of memory he brought to hand some very odd catches indeed; the smell of powder on the nose of a dark-eyed nymph contrasted sharply with the odour of hot peas, the stink of the flaring naphtha-light swinging over the stall, the sharp, stale smell of vanished beer and strong tobacco. But he knew he would never attain to coherence, and he gave up the attempt. One thing only had he retrieved from limbo which gave him a clue to the present situation: he remembered giving his man Sidders strict orders about the *Aphrodite*. And the reliable Sidders had duly functioned. Here he was, tasting novelty, and enjoying every moment of it.

Above the level of the deck as she came up the ladder the head of Kay French appeared, and he arose hastily to get a deck-chair out of the locker. She waved, smiled, approached with a perfection of motion in her trim legs which filled him with secret delight. He fixed the chair, put a cushion behind her back.

"Thanks so much," she said. "Would you consider it intrusive if I were to call you Wixy?"

"My dear girl," he said, "I should consider it an enrichment."

"Mister," she said, "seems so unsuitable. Besides, we really are old friends, and I went much further than Wixy at Broxley."

"You don't say so?"

"Champagne," she told him, "always stimulates my bump of affection. I called you darling."

"May I be forgiven," muttered Mr. Wix. "Not to remember is my worst punishment. Meantime, what's your favourite champagne?"

They laughed. From the bridge Captain Sale saluted, called out a good morning, prophesied a spell of fine weather. Aft by the ship's bell Lady Eleanor, Ada Letts, and Mr. Puckle were gathered in a group with Dunne. Suddenly Kay French sighed, and fell solemn.

"Wixy," she said, "I've made a mistake. It was unwise to have brought my brother. It hurts me to see him——"

"It's early days yet," put in Mr. Wix. "Give him time to settle down."

"You spoke to him this morning, didn't you?"

"Just to pass the time of day."

"Poor Herbert. I'm afraid he's very uphill work."

"I shall persevere. I'm very industrious."

"I'm afraid he won't thank you. He's so unrewarding. How did he strike you?"

"H'm." Mr. Wix considered. "He seemed a bit under the weather. Nervous, perhaps, and ill at ease."

"All that," nodded the girl, "and something more. He's all on edge. Strung up. Nervous, ill at ease—he's always been that. But this is something that goes deeper."

"Aren't you imagining things?"

"No. You see, I know him. I grew up with him. He's never been like this, until this last fortnight."

"You're fond of him?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps that gets in your way, makes it difficult for you to stand off, get an objective view. I shouldn't worry too much if I were you. Where is he, by the way?"

"In his cabin. I pleaded with him to come on deck. Wixy—he's terribly difficult. It's heartbreaking to try and get him to lead a normal life. I thought this trip would do him good, take him out of himself. It's so disappointing. And embarrassing too. If he's going to keep to his cabin all the time—well, it's peculiar, to say the least. But

I've no right. It isn't a very inspiring subject. We'll change it. You shall tell me about your past life."

2

The sky, the busy motions of wavelets, the immaculate decks white as a chorister's surplice under a benevolent sun, little ships seen on the horizon and the gulls planing on static wings—Ada Letts looked at each in turn and was charmed. From time to time as she listened to that gong-like voice the beginnings of a smile quivered about her lips, and laughter trembled in her breast: the battle to keep a grave face was incessant, and when laughter was in order she laughed immoderately, the bottled-up amusement burst from her as out of a pricked balloon, so that Mrs. Weiss looked at her uncertainly, and said:

"You sure do see the funny side, Miss Letts. As I was saying, Ida takes after her father. Cyrus was a very vigorous man, he sort of impressed his stamp on everything he did. Of course you can see she doesn't get her looks from me. I'm a Nordic, tall, and blonde, whereas Ida—well, I think sometimes that Cyrus had maybe some Eastern blood in his veins, and if I had my time over again I'd certainly take notice of eugenics and how to raise pure stock. But there you are, it was a kind of mishap with Cyrus, under the bushes if you know what I mean, and I dare say you know what a girl feels like what with the warm nights, and the hunter's moon, and being so full of beans. One thing I'll say, Cyrus made love beautifully—kind of reverent and spiritual he was. Will you have a cigarette?"

Mrs. Weiss produced a platinum case studded with diamonds.

"But as I said," she went on, "he had this vigorous side. I'm not saying I wasn't happy. But, well, Ida's always been a disappointment. A girl with her money—do you know she's gotten a private fortune of nine hundred

thousand dollars? Tell me, Miss Letts—what's your impression of Ida, of her personal appearance? "

"She's got beautiful legs," said Ada Letts, "the most beautiful legs, I think, I've ever seen."

"That's what I tell her," nodded Mrs. Weiss. "And she ought to make the most of them. She's careless about her suspenders. The seam of the stocking should be straight up the leg. And, of course, she's got a lovely figure; she won the golden Venus de Milo for the best figure at the Los Angeles convention. But . . . you haven't said anything about her face, Miss Letts."

"She's got a most attractive smile, and really splendid teeth. And her face has certainly got character; it isn't an empty face, by any means."

"Character. Do you think that's what men want? "

"I have known men who preferred character to prettiness. After all, character goes deeper than good looks, Mrs. Weiss."

"Miss Letts," said Mrs. Weiss, earnestly, "I sure do appreciate the kind things you're saying about Ida. As far as that goes, they're true. But you know as well as I do that she got a pretty raw deal when beauty was handed out."

"Everybody," pointed out Ada Letts, "can't be beautiful. I can't quote statistics, but I should think that not one girl in ten thousand is really beautiful."

"Maybe you're right. On the other hand, not one girl in a hundred thousand is handicapped like Ida. I'm going to say right out, Miss Letts, that it's an affliction."

"I wouldn't go so far as that. And anyway, Ida seems to bear it very well. She's quite unself-conscious, and happy."

Mrs. Weiss ignored this comment. Her eyes were fixed with distaste on the picture of Ida which she had called up in her mind.

"And it isn't," she went on, "as if it couldn't be helped. There's really no need for her to look that way. You've

heard of Kundl, the great plastic surgeon? He could give her a complete new set of features, if only she'd let him. He saw her. In three months, he said, the face could be entirely remodelled. But would she listen to reason? She just gave him the air. Can you understand such conduct? She's a vital girl, Miss Letts. She wants to marry, and have children. And I dare say she can, if she likes to marry the ice-man, or a street cop."

Mrs. Weiss sighed. "She's wilful, and obstinate. It's my one great grief, Miss Letts, that we don't see eye to eye. With her fortune, and the help of Mr. Kundl, she could marry anybody; it's always been my ambition for her to marry into one of your fine old English families."

"Is she afraid of the operation?"

"Afraid nothing. She just wouldn't stand for it. Said her features were real, anyway, and she wasn't going to have any beauty doctors monkeying about with her jaw-line or altering the set of her nose. That was four years ago. She's twenty-five. Another five years, and—well—who knows? Maybe she'll have filled out. Look at me. Would you believe that I was once a perfect thirty-six?"

Ada Letts didn't look at Mrs. Weiss. All at once she started with delight as a school of dolphins broke surface off the starboard side, plunged downwards, leaped again into the air, skipping like lambs, undulating in an ecstasy of grace, curving in a ballet of silver arcs as their eyes were fired for a moment by the flash of the sun. From for'ard Kay French called out and clapped her hands with joy, Mr. Wix made a burlesque dolphin-motion with his hand, and the animals themselves disappeared in a last masterly dive. It was, for Ada Letts, an interlude of sheer perfection, a moment of happiness which would be for ever a part of her fabric. But for Mrs. Weiss it was a mere aside, an intrusion into the serious business of life. She said:

"Miss Letts, I'd be a happy woman if only Ida was safely married to a suitable husband. And by suitable, I mean somebody that's got class, and breeding, and tradition.

You know what I mean? A background of solid pedigree, old oaks in the deer-park, ancestors in the picture gallery, and—well—mustiness, and ancient times, the things that made England's—huh—green and pleasant land. Somebody, for instance, like Mr. Dunne."

"Oh, yes?"

Mrs. Weiss paused. "I wonder if you'd care to help me?"

Ada Letts sat up. "I? I don't sec——"

"It would," put in Mrs. Weiss, "be helping Ida, too. I joined this party for one thing, Miss Letts—there's no disgrace in confessing it."

Ada Letts began to catch the drift. "You mean——"

"I want Ida to marry Mr. Dunne. I'd give anything to pull it off—half my fortune. You don't blame me?"

Miss Letts laughed. "Certainly not. It's a perfectly good idea. But where do I come in?"

"I thought maybe, being engaged yourself, you'd be sympathetic towards Ida."

"I am. I like Ida very much."

"That's fine! Thank you, Miss Letts, thanks a lot."

And now Mrs. Weiss, in a tone suitably restrained, broached the core of her subject. She had overheard Miss Letts and Michael Dunne talking about the murals.

"Myself, I'm no great shakes on Art. But you two were going ahead like a house afire. You've got something in common."

"Mrs. Weiss," said Ada Letts, "I think I know what you are going to say. You want me to play the matchmaker. Isn't that so?"

Mrs. Weiss gave an apologetic laugh. "I thought maybe you'd be able to influence Mr. Dunne."

"I think you're rather optimistic. I only met him yesterday. Certainly I'll sing Ida's praises. But anything further than that—a direct approach, for instance——"

"No, of course not," interposed Mrs. Weiss, hastily. "I wouldn't expect it of you,"

She beamed. "It's real heartening to know I've got an ally, Miss Letts. I'll never be able to thank you enough, never."

CHAPTER FIVE

Light on Mr. Puckle

1

THE LUXURIOUS SETTEES, the Aubusson carpet, the mahogany table, immensely solid—alone in the saloon Dunne contemplated his possessions with a deep feeling of contentment whilst he compared to-day with yesterdays passed in Great Portland Street. The translation from cam-shafts, connecting-rods, big ends and the like to the polite surroundings of a gentleman's yacht was still a matter for wonder with him, still a fascinating novelty to which he reacted with a naïve and juvenile eagerness that was expressed in private, as now, with his fingers stroking the patina of old wood and his eye lingering with delight on the pattern of the carpet. He had a great capacity for happiness for which he hadn't found much scope in the past. Freedom in its largest sense had not been possible at the beck and call of an employer. And now, with the frustrating bonds snapped at a blow, he was gambolling in spirit like a terrier-pup let off the lead. The present was pure romance; the most sober estimate of the future promised nothing but sunny days; he foresaw the time when he might, by dint of judicious management and prudent investment, live once more amidst the lawns of Bredon. Meantime, this was the kind of holiday, he thought, which made a man thankful to be alive. He arose and pressed the bell.

"You rang, sir?"

Sims, the steward, in a spotless white suit, S.Y. *Aphrodite* inscribed in crimson on the collar.

"Oh, Sims. Bring in some stuff for cocktails, will you? Bacardi, absinthe, curaçao, gin, everything."

"Yes, sir."

Sims had attained to a high degree of excellence in his profession. He could make fascinating shapes with napkins, pour from two bottles into two glasses at one and the same time, dress a boar's head expertly with creamy rosettes and pink flutings, and now, with fingers extended under the bottom of a heavy silver tray stacked with a dozen or so bottles, he marched into the saloon with it high over his head and, with a twist of his arm, lowered it on to the table.

"Good," said Dunne. "Now a shaker, some ice, lemons—you know the usual things. And when you've done that, you might ask everyone to step down into the saloon for cocktails. Oh—yes—you'd better include the Captain."

"Yes, sir."

2

Lady Eleanor was the first to arrive. With a multi-coloured handkerchief tied around her head and a blouse patterned with polychromatic embroideries, she looked like someone from the Balkans in national dress.

"Oh, hello?" she said. "How nice! I love cocktails. Have one of these, they're Turkish. Did you see the dolphins?"

"Damn, no. Were there very many?"

"A family of them, I should say. Father, mother, and four or five bouncing children. Delicious. They moved like a troupe of acrobats. Match?"

"Thanks so much. Annoying not to have seen them."

"Yes, they're rather jolly. The incarnation of high spirits." She cocked an ear. "Hullo. I hear the voice of America."

"All of it," said Dunne with a grin.

The saloon door opened to let in the Weisses, Ada Letts, Kay French and, shortly afterwards, Mr. Puckle in earnest

conversation with Mr. Wix about the benefits of investment in a young and vigorous country; in particular, he was offering some undeveloped lots of real estate in Los Angeles at prices which he was confident would pay a thousand per cent in six months' time.

"A thousand per cent?" said Mr. Wix. "You astound me."

"Listen," said Mr. Puckle, "I was tipped off about these here lots way back in twenty-four, and all they cost me was a packet of chicken-feed. To anybody else I wouldn't sell under a hundred dollars a foot to-day, in fact, I guess I'm not doing any business at all. No, *sir!* These here lots is going to make the grade, they're going to bust the top right off'n the market, they're going up like a flock of skyrockets at a Coney Island convention, and anybody who sells out at the ceiling price is going to buy himself a nest-egg for his old age that'll make financial history."

"It sounds," suggested Mr. Wix, "like a realtor's dream."

"You know, Lady Eleanor," said Mrs. Weiss, "you've got a wonderful heritage. And one is aware of it, you give off a kind of aura, a sort of spiritual perfume. Of course, I'm psychic, and I get these sense-impressions very strongly—the Crusaders on their palfreys, Henry at the Field of the Cloth of Gold, Lords and Ladies in their velvets and farthingales, and musicians in the galleries chanting their—huh—madrigals."

Lady Eleanor smiled sweetly. "Really? But how entertaining for you!"

Kay French caught Ida's eye, received a gleeful grimace, and lowered her glance hastily. Lady Eleanor's gaze, fixed on Mrs. Weiss, encouraged that lady with the gravity of an interested auditor.

"And how clever of you, Mrs. Weiss," she added. "I'm afraid I shouldn't know a farthingale from a madrigal."

"Oh, I'm a great student of the past," said Mrs. Weiss. "And, of course, Cyrus was never in sympathy with me. He used to bawl me out something terrible about how I

was always rooting about amongst dead bones when I ought to be marching ahead into the glorious future of the United States. If you're so nuts on the Crusaders, Bella, he would say, why don't you get some of the Crusading spirit into your daily life? The way this house is run is, by golly, a disgrace. Right now it needs a coupla Knights Templars to beat the daylight outta the kitchen staff—if you can call it a staff."

At the other side of the table Ada Letts drained her glass, rolled its contents reflectively on her tongue.

"That," she pronounced, "was rather divine. What is its name?"

"The Merry Widow," said Dunne.

"How apt. It's got subtlety, and wistfulness, and the lilt of a Strauss waltz. Do you think my imagination's got drunk? Perhaps it has. Not on the Merry Widow, but the charm of this lovely yacht. May I have another?"

"You certainly may."

"You're an awfully lucky man. Is envy a sin? I'd just love to own the *Aphrodite*. Still, I can do the next best thing. I've got the whole of the voyage in which to pretend she's mine."

"No, sir!" said Mr. Puckle. "I'm not selling. But, I'll tell you what I'll do, brother. I guess I've taken a shine to you. I'll let you in on the ground floor."

"Too kind," murmured Mr. Wix. "Much too kind."

"Not at all," said Mr. Puckle. "Only too pleased. Say, I've gotten the plans down in my room, the titles, everything. If you'd care to step along——"

Mr. Wix gently patted Mr. Puckle's shoulder. "Not now, old boy, not now. Later. Will you excuse me?"

He went over and joined Kay French on the settee. Captain Sale, who had just joined Dunne, looked fresh and pink and brighteyed like a baby new from the bath.

"Now, Captain, what will you have?" Dunne looked round at his guests, at Lady Eleanor's elf-like prettiness (a

cameo, he thought, pink alabaster, roses and cream), at Ada Letts who gave him a quick smile, at Ida Weiss whose eyes twinkled at him with blithe malice as she shrugged a shoulder towards her mother, at Kay French and Mr. Wix in earnest conversation. And, all at once, the thought of Herbert French pricked his mind to leave behind it a cloud.

The Captain raised his glass. "Well, sir, jolly good health."

Dunne saw with his mind's eye the oddness of black coat and sponge-bag trousers, the sparse hair, the ravaged face, the shrinking nervousness of Herbert French. This fellow, he thought, was going to be a drag on the proceedings, and he was moved by something like dismay.

"What do you think to the ship, Captain?"

"I'm very pleased with her, sir, she's behaving very nicely. You'd expect that, of course—she's Clyde-built."

"Are the men happy?"

"I know I should be happy in their place. Cushions on the lockers and Vi-Spring beds—well, there's such a thing as living too soft. Oh, they're happy, all right. I know I was never treated like that. I dare say you've heard all about salt dog, and weevilly biscuits? I served my time in the hard way, a donkey's breakfast for a mattress and bugs for bedmates. Not nice, maybe, but it made damned good sailors."

Captain Sale looked at his watch, drained his glass, and picked up his cap.

"If you'll excuse me, sir—we alter course at seven bells. Thank you."

Catching sight of the steward outside the glass doors, Dunne put up a finger.

"Did you forget Mr. French?"

"Sorry, sir, no. I forgot to tell you. He asked if you'd excuse him. He said he had some letters to write."

He turned to receive a smile from Ida Weiss.

"Mamma," she said, "has gotten an anxiety-complex."

She clucks around all the time in case I should take the wrong turning."

She laughed. "Well, I guess it'll have to be a dark night, with a puss like mine. The face that sunk a thousand ships, Mr. Dunne."

For a moment Dunne was embarrassed. And then, seeing the merriment in her eyes, he was infected by her giggle.

"I don't agree," he said. "Shall I number your blessings? Item one, nice eyes. Two, splendid teeth. Three, a really attractive voice."

"Boloney," she jeered. "If I give you any rope you'll be telling me I'm Greta Garbo's double."

Sims came up. "Beg pardon, sir, but the Captain's compliments, and there's a P. & O. liner about to pass us close to starboard. He thought maybe you'd like to see her."

3

The guests rushed on deck—all save Mr. Puckle. At the table he helped himself to another cocktail, sat down and thoughtfully sipped it. Although he was combining it with pleasure, Mr. Puckle was here in a strict business capacity. He was a wolf, seeking whom he might devour, and his fare for this voyage was an investment which must be made to pay fat dividends. And now, as he sat slowly twirling his glass in a beautiful white hand, he was assessing his chances of success, and finding them limited. The Letts woman, Kay French, her brother, Lady Eleanor—they were just so much dead meat from Mr. Puckle's point of view, and this was a disappointment to him; he had expected that a voyage to the East at a cost of four hundred pounds would attract only the idle rich, and bring in its train as a natural consequence something important in the way of jewellery. So far, he had seen nothing in this line which he wouldn't flick across any restaurant table to the Sadie or the Claire of the moment—Lady Eleanor's single

emerald, for instance, he had priced up with one glance of his bright eye at no more than four hundred dollars, and as for Weiss, God damn her cautious mind, she was abroad in the family paste whilst the real stuff was sweating in some safe-deposit. Ida? Her hands were innocent of ornament, her neck went unadorned. And no wonder, thought Mr. Puckle viciously, with a clock that would put a starving tiger off his breakfast.

Mr. Puckle lit a cigarette and thought of other voyages, more blessed with scope. An expert card-sharper, he had for years favoured the Atlantic run, and he sat anew in fancy betting on a Royal flush with a jack-pot of five hundred pounds waiting to be gathered in. He thought of the little Countess who had compromised herself with the good-looking steward under his own sharp eyes, thus lending herself to a profitable bit of blackmail, of profitable nights with Legs Diamond in Chicago, and of that horrid period when he had been reduced to working the tubs (buses) in London as a common pickpocket. A blow to Mr. Puckle's pride that had been, and the subsequent term in Pentonville (he had been pulled in for six month's hard) had exacerbated his nerves.

And he hadn't been in the money lately; times were tough, there was no longer any percentage on the New York-Southampton run what with the general slump and notices posted all over the ships warning the innocent against card-sharpers. Funds were getting low; aside from the four hundred pounds he had gambled on this voyage to Eastern waters he could call on no more than six hundred and fifty dollars or so. As for selling this bird Wix a parcel of phoney titles to a non-existent Eldorado, the hope of that, he now saw, depended on getting him canned. Behind all the easiness and geniality of Mr. Wix was a sceptical wariness, and Mr. Puckle had not been at his best under what he suspected was a slightly mocking brown eye.

But Mr. Wix stewed was a very different proposition.

For Mr. Wix, happily inebriated, five-pound notes were as nothing. *Dross, old boy, dross. Help yourself.* Mr. Puckle's eyes gleamed as he saw anew that surprising shower of paper in full flight across the saloon. What a chance to have missed! He would remember it to his dying day.

CHAPTER SIX

Visitor for Herbert French

1

WITH THE COMING OF DUSK a fresh wind began to blow from the south-west. With each gust it increased in power, and very shortly the yacht was plunging uneasily into the wide troughs of the Atlantic Ocean, riding with lively alarm on the crests of dark hillocks which turned dimly white in the gathering gloom. Now and again the *Aphrodite* careened dizzily; for the first time since leaving the Channel she was in free and forthright motion, and this served to increase Herbert French's misery. The ship tumbled and lurched and quivered, and with each shuddering downfall into watery craters Herbert French held on to his chair, closed his eyes and stopped breathing.

Meantime his deep-set eyes glowed with an almost animal light as he concentrated on the immediate past. The details recurred to him again and again; a kind of mind-paralysis had come upon him, an inability to think save in anything but an everlasting circle of monotony, a complete helplessness to get away from an endless and frightening repetition of the details material to his crime. And these thoughts, through constant iteration, gradually acquired a life outside of Herbert French's mind; they stood apart, menacing, monstrous, clothed in the horrid rags of nightmare, mocking him with the promise of an awful doom. For it was Herbert French's infirmity that

his nature was hyper-sensitive, and whatever sense of proportion he might have possessed was nullified by an over-active imagination.

A natural timidity, a distaste for the company of his fellows, a faculty for magnifying molehills, a complete lack of interest in games, of response to music, to any form of culture, to any of the things which, as they say, make life worth living—by any standards these would be accounted disabilities in a human being. At the age of forty Herbert French was known to be a man with a kink. He required of Mrs. Cartwright, his landlady, nothing beyond breakfast and a hot meal at night. Conversation he discouraged, and after the first few attempts Mrs. Cartwright said only good morning, good night, or such other words as were necessary for the smooth running of Number 8 King Street. He ate always at home. Not since boyhood had he been seen inside a restaurant. For the privilege of eating indifferently cooked food he paid Mrs. Cartwright two guineas a week. He was a model lodger.

Every morning he passed out of King Street on the stroke of eight, and he returned to it every night without speaking to a soul. He walked always with his eyes bent to the ground, and of the life which went on in King Street he knew next to nothing after fifteen years of residence therein. In the course of time Mrs. Cartwright came to pity the "poor gentleman," and she invented for him a fictitious hussy who had jilted him at the very altar. "Brooding, he is," she would say, "just pining away." This, according to Mrs. Cartwright, was what he did with his time all alone in that room of his at Number Eight. He rarely read a newspaper, or listened to the radio; he never went to the cinema, or had a flutter on the two-thirty, or went out to Hampstead Heath on Sundays, and if he ever smiled it was a poor ghost of a thing that died at birth.

Not once in fifteen years had Mrs. Cartwright seen anything like a twinkle in those lustreless grey eyes. And at nights, when she had finished her work and poured out her

Guinness, she wondered a lot. She wondered what he did for a living, whether he had consumption or cancer, what that high-stepping sister of his thought about him, and where she got money for taxis and clothes like you never saw. And once, when Herbert French had become a part of the profound silence in the room above, she tiptoed up the stairs and knelt at the keyhole. She retreated in dudgeon, for the man within had hung something over the lock. "Fancy that now," she muttered to herself, very red in the face. "The very ideal "

2

If there was one thing that Herbert French could have predicted with absolute confidence it was this: that he would never find himself on a voyage to the East in a luxury yacht. Of his own free will he was not at this moment sitting in a cabin on board the *Aphrodite*. He was here because they would not let him alone, "they" meaning people, and people meaning in the present instance his sister Kay. As a passenger on board a yacht he was in the highest degree improbable. His appearance excited sympathy and put a damper on high spirits. It was, of course, due to a neurosis; in the jargon of Freud, he was a victim of repressed inferiority, an anxiety complex. Now there was added to it a secret which, like a malignant growth, was eating into his mind. Less than ever was he fitted for social intercourse. And, for the first time in his life, he was on tenterhooks for the news from Daventry.

He was in a pretty bad way. The loudspeaker by the side of his bunk, retailing cricket scores, the weather forecast, and the results of the racing at Newmarket, fascinated him to the exclusion of all else; even the motion of the ship was forgotten as he awaited the conclusion of the news bulletin and the single sentence that he had imagined time and time again. And at last it came.

"That is the end of the news. Here is a police message. . . ."

Herbert French switched off. Not for him. The reaction made him tremble, drained him of strength. At this moment Mr. Wix, passing along the corridor outside, suddenly pulled up as if he had seen a ghost.

The door of the cabin was on the hook, and what Mr. Wix saw was the reflection of its occupant in the mirror. With some speed he turned about and made his way to the steward's pantry.

When at last Herbert French raised his head he saw that Mr. Wix had entered silently, without knocking. Mr. Wix said, softly:

"Better drink this, old boy."

He drank. Mr. Wix gazed out of the porthole at nothing and whistled a snatch of song under his breath. Out of his eye-corner he watched for signs of animation. Presently:

"Thanks," said Herbert French, low. "That was good. How did you——"

"How did I know you needed it?" Mr. Wix twinkled. The next moment Herbert French's eyes suddenly brimmed with tears as a plump hand patted his shoulder.

"Sorry," he muttered. "I wish you wouldn't——"

"Wouldn't what?"

"Worry about me. I'm all right."

"I never worry about anything," said Mr. Wix. "And of course you're all right; right as ninepence." Gently he gripped Herbert French's arm. "Fresh air, that's what you need. Yes? We'll go on deck, shall we?"

CHAPTER SEVEN

Ears to Hear

1

BOISTEROUS WEATHER met them on deck. In the light shed by lamps set in the upper structure the planks gleamed

wetly; wind and water were doing their noisy best to harass the ship's smooth passage, and succeeding very well. Heavy seas thumped against her bows. The wind sustained itself as if forced by some enormous machinery, and Herbert French, precariously at large in the midst of violence, was alarmed. But Mr. Wix had settled down to this business of being on shipboard. The unsure feeling at the pit of his stomach had vanished; he took hold of Herbert French's arm and walked the drunken deck with a large and reassuring confidence. He felt enormously fit; not for years had he felt just this rude and energetic health, and the sheer novelty of it made him chuckle.

"Grand! " he said loudly, above the shout of the wind. "Half an hour of this and you'll feel no end of a fellow."

Mr. Wix had very soon discovered the difference between the lee and weather sides. When Herbert French sat down in the lee of the funnel he was amazed to find that wind and water (save for an occasional capful of spray) no longer obtruded themselves. Mr. Wix fussed over him, wrapping his legs in a rug from the chair-locker, adjusting the angle of his seat. To Herbert French he seemed immensely mature and capable, a wise uncle with something of the Creator's omnipotence, and the victim of neurosis felt strangely comforted like a man who reaches sanctuary after a long and arduous struggle. But this feeling was transient, and in the next moment he touched despair again. He said:

"I suppose they're all talking about me?"

"You're wrong, old boy," said Mr. Wix. "Nobody's talking about you. Smoke?"

"No thanks. I don't smoke."

"You ought to. Tobacco is the friend of man. Soothes the savage breast."

Herbert French gave a short and bitter laugh. "It's no good. All this—I'm out of my element. I just don't fit in. I never could talk to people."

"What of it?" said Mr. Wix. "No compulsion to talk, none at all. Anyhow, you're doing very well for a non-talker."

After a long pause, Herbert French concluded: "I knew it wasn't my—my cup of tea. I should never have come. If it hadn't been for my sister——"

"Ah," said Mr. Wix. "A grand girl, your sister. You're a very lucky man."

"Am I? I don't know. Sometimes I wish——"

"No, no," interrupted Mr. Wix. "You don't wish anything of the kind, not at bottom."

"No," admitted the other, "not really. She over-persuaded me. She thought I was ill. I'm not. I ought to know. It's just that I—I find things too much for me. Life. People. Noise, bustle, competition, the necessity to fight for a living—I try every day to reduce it to its proper proportion, to make it seem ordinary. I suppose it sounds silly to you. But there it is. I can't adjust myself. I don't say that I was happy at Number Eight. But I had, when I got home to my room and all was quiet, a sort of peace. I used to look forward to it, the solitude, the silence—without that I couldn't have gone on. But you wouldn't understand. It isn't to be expected."

"Man," said Mr. Wix, "is a mysterious animal. I don't understand anybody, least of all myself. Anyway, solitude, silence, peace—nothing wrong about that, old boy, nothing at all."

Footsteps approached from for'ard. Mr. Brindle gave them a good night, passed on. The engine-room skylight, opened from below, let out a gust of warm air and the hum of turbines. Herbert French went on:

"Nothing but the tick of the clock, and a book. Eastern philosophy, Mr. Wix. Would it surprise you to know that I read 'nothing else? Yoga, Ashram, the release of the spirit—have you ever——"

Once, Mr. Wix admitted, he had dipped into a book on Yoga. "Quicer birds, those Yogis," he said. "Extrude

their bowels to give 'em a spring-clean now and again, don't they? Rum sort of pastime."

"How I wish," pronounced Herbert French, passionately, "I was there now! "

"Where, old boy? "

But Herbert French, ignoring the question, pitched his voice in a tone of desperation.

"Mr. Wix," he said, "I'm fond of my sister. She's all I've got in the world, and she's kindness itself. But women never know where to stop. Why, in God's name, won't they take no for an answer? I'm in danger of arrest, a heavy sentence, prison, ruination."

2

Mr. Wix was sensible to a mild shock; Herbert French was the last man from whom he would have expected a confession of this kind. A heavy sentence, ruination—it surely *couldn't* be as bad as that; the fellow had probably got things all out of focus. He said:

"Whoa! Let's get things straight. Just what have you done? "

In the dim light of the deck-lamps Herbert French's face looked like a mask of clay furnished with two frightened eyes.

"I acted," he said miserably, "on impulse. Have you heard of Andrew Harriwell, the millionaire philanthropist? "

"Died recently," nodded Mr. Wix. "A pillar of the Church, and brother-in-law to a bishop."

"Philanthropist! " said Herbert French, bitterly. "For fifteen years I was his secretary. I worked all hours. You may say that I was his slave. He paid me, if you can believe it, four pounds a week. As to whether I could have got a rise, that I don't know. I could never bring myself to ask—a constitutional disability, cowardice, if you like. Moreover, I was content to go on earning a pittance because

he told me several times that he had taken care of my future in his will. You can, of course, anticipate the sequel? "

"He left you nothing? "

"Not a penny. Naturally, I was cut up about it. But no thought of crime entered my head at the time. I'm the sort of man who has no use for crime anyway, and it would never have occurred to me but for one thing."

"And that? " encouraged Mr. Wix.

"I suppose I was looking a bit off colour. Kay came round to my diggings, full up with this trip to the East. You may imagine how that sounded to a man of my habits and temperament. I refused repeatedly. She argued, pleaded, beseeched me to go. Finally she produced a *fait accompli*—she had booked my passage.

"At the time I was going over Harriwell's papers with the solicitor. I was rather worried about the prospect of this trip, and it was at the back of my mind every day. There was a globe of the world in the library, and one lunch-time, tracing the probable course the ship would take, I put my finger on the port of Bombay.

"For some time I stood there with a vague memory stirring. Then—click—it came into focus, bridging a gap of ten years. I remembered an interview between Duvelli, the Art dealer, and Harriwell. He had a standing order from Harriwell to pick up anything rare he came across in his travels. And Duvelli had brought back from Bombay the Chanyu miniatures. Harriwell had an enormous collection of paintings and *objets d'art*. But that's by the way. The point is that I stole them. A sudden brain-storm, all my bitterness and resentment crystallized into an ache for revenge. You understand? "

"I do, old boy. Perfectly."

Herbert French made a desperate gesture. "You don't know what misery I've suffered since——"

"I can imagine it," put in Mr. Wix. "Oh, yes."

"It was the day before I came away. If I'd had more

time, time to cool down, to reflect, I should have returned the things. To steal—it's foreign to me, I've never——"

"Of course not," said Mr. Wix. "Miniatures, you said. That means——"

"They're very small—about six inches by four, paintings done on ivory by the Japanese artist Hirohaichi. There are twelve of them."

"And they're valuable?"

"Harriwell paid six hundred pounds apiece for them. They're erotic. Obscene, in fact. Not the kind of thing you could display. Harriwell kept them under lock and key."

"Of course," nodded Mr. Wix. "And he'd take them to church with him, in his mind. What a piece of work is man! But something occurs to me. He'd want to keep them secret. Surely they wouldn't be missed?"

"Mrs. Harriwell intends to sell the entire collection through Duvelli. And that's what I was coming back to. Duvelli told Harriwell that the dealer in Bombay would buy the miniatures back at any time for three thousand pounds. He's a Chinaman who trades under the name of Chung Soo."

"I see. And, naturally, no questions asked. All you had to do was to make use of this ready-made channel."

"Exactly. But now—Mr. Wix, I'm sick with worry. There's no question of disposing of the things. I wish to God that I'd never taken them. What do you think will be Duvelli's conclusion when he finds out? He can't have forgotten that I was in the room when he made the deal with Harriwell. And he'll learn sooner or later that I'm on my way to Bombay."

Suddenly Herbert French buried his face in his hands.

"Oh, God," he groaned, "what shall I do? The disgrace. It isn't for myself that I care so much. It's my sister. She——"

Mr. Wix stretched out a hand, gripped the other's shoulder, gently shook it.

"Steady," he counselled. "No panic, old boy, no panic at all. You're overwrought. You've got things all out of true. Reason, coolness—that's the ticket. Now then. Let's look at the facts."

3

Mr. Wix's voice was deep, and soft, and kindly, and his personality was a proper complement to his physique, which means that it was powerful, a sure shield against the four winds and the raging seas of life, a rock for the weak, and a sanctuary for the weary. And Herbert French, listening to the subtle charm of that voice, felt himself soothed, and in a measure reassured. Not for years had he talked to anybody at such length, and he had only been driven to it now by extreme emotion. His secret had been too heavy to carry, its implications too terrible to bear, and now that Mr. Wix was sharing it he felt some relief.

"In the first place," said Mr. Wix, "suspicion isn't proof. In the second place, even if they had proof, you wouldn't get a heavy sentence. First offence, extenuating circumstances, and so forth. Not that it will ever get as far as that. All this panic and worry—you *are* running a bit ahead of schedule, old boy. Eh?"

"Sooner or later," reiterated Herbert French, "Duvelli will find out."

"All right. Suppose he finds out, and his suspicion falls on you. That doesn't get him anywhere. In any case, he might be dead, ill, out of the country; a dozen things might have happened to him. I don't say it's likely. I'm just trying to point out how unwise it is to jump to conclusions and run to meet trouble. And by the way, weren't you listening to the news when I——"

"The police message. I thought——"

"You *are* a case." Mr. Wix shook with laughter. "Can't possibly happen, old boy. If you were wanted for murder—yes, by all means. But to name anybody in a broadcast

who might be suspected of—no, not on your life. They couldn't do it. It's against the law."

"You're not telling me this just to——"

"Certainly not. What I've just said is a hundred per cent true, it's Gospel. But that's by the way. About these miniatures. What we want is a plan, some scheme that'll reverse matters. For what it's worth, I've got an idea. I take it they'll make up into a fairly small parcel?"

"They're already made up into a parcel."

"Right. Now listen. I've got a pal who's head cook and bottle washer of British Overseas Airways at Port Said. . . ."

4

If Mr. Wix hadn't been preoccupied with the helping of Herbert French over the coaming of the companion-way when he came on deck he must have seen a figure dodge swiftly into the shadow of the funnel. Mr. Puckle's sharp eyes had, of course, seen Mr. Wix, and Mr. Puckle's crafty feet had dodged on principle. In a lifetime of questionable activities he had cultivated the art of eavesdropping with results almost always surprising and very often beneficial. And, setting aside mere principle, Mr. Wix was a walking cornucopia, a perambulating bank whose magnetic influence was limitless. So Mr. Puckle, pressed against the funnel in the near-darkness, waited in hope and expectation. And then, catching sight of the two men moving for'ard along the lee side, he dropped hastily on all fours between funnel and engine-room casing. From time to time sheets of spray came over and wetted his legs. Uncomfortably hot on one side, he was cold on the other. But Mr. Puckle, roasted, soaked, and cramped, stuck to his post. Business was business.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Crook Story

1

DOWN IN THE STEWARD'S PANTRY Albert Sims was lording it with one of the owner's cigars and a bottle of Bass whilst Jim Barwood, his assistant, fumbled with a row of glasses and a polishing-cloth. Albert Sims had collected a rich experience of stewarding; twenty years in the P. & O. boats had furnished him with any amount of expertness and a large contempt for what he called "crashing amachooers." And now, one thumb tucked into the armhole of his waistcoat, one leg crossed over the other, he observed Jim Barwood with a lofty eye. Jim Barwood was not merely a crashing amachoor; he was green as the green sea, three days out on his first trip ever.

Albert Sims glanced at the clock.

"Well," he said, "you're getting about 'em, I must say, Barwood. You're putting 'em to rights, and no mistake. Three minutes to polish three glasses. Rot my bones if you ain't a ruddy masterpiece. Here—gimme that cloth, a glass."

Albert Sims gave a lightning demonstration of glass-polishing. In ten seconds the thing gleamed like crystal.

"There y'are, Barwood—all done by kindness. But you gotta know how. Knack, see? Know what they'd do with you in the P. & O. boats? Kill you stone dead. Five hundred glasses an hour, that's what I've done when there's been a rush. You'd just pass out, o' man, die of exhaustion."

"It's not being used to it," explained Barwood. "I'll pick it up, all right."

"Think so? Well, you got a lot to learn, o' man, a hell of a lot. F'rinstance, could you tell me the difference between Château-Margaux and a bottle o' ginger pop?

Not you. You're just a baby at stewarding. I gotta feed you on the bottle and teach you how to walk. I gotta teach you, God help us, how to wash up. Silver first, and always the fishy things last. Got that? And what did I tell you yesterd'y about laying the table? Come on, o' man—quick's the word!

Albert Sims waited. Jim Barwood, his thought-processes all gone to glory under this sudden attack, slowly flushed.

"There y'are—burn my liver and tripes if he ain't forgotten! Now listen to me. For the last time."

Jim Barwood listened. He was keen. He liked the life, he wanted to make good. In his spare time he entertained wild dreams in which he sat behind a door labelled *Purser* in a crack liner and wore gold braid on his sleeves.

"And another thing," went on Albert Sims. "Department. Your department's chronic, it's all to hell. I seen you push past Miss French this morning when she opened her door. God stew my old trotters, o' man, where you bin dragged up? In future, when any passenger opens their door, or mcets you in the corridor, you stand aside—like this."

Albert Sims arose, put his heels together, slightly bowed.

"Madam!" he murmured, submissive, almost reverent. And, swivelling a fierce eye on Jim Barwood: "Or sir, as the case may be. Savvee?"

"I'll remember," promised his subordinate.

"I 'ope you will," said Albert Sims, "otherwise it reflects on me. By God, o' man, you gotta perk up. Anythink as I turn out from this pantry has got to be grade A."

Albert Sims threw away his cigar-end and looked suddenly reflective.

"God," he muttered, "that Miss French. If you never seen a lady, o' man, there's one. Neat as a compass needle. Nice as treacle-tart, ripe as a young plum. Makes yer think of all sorts of daftness. Marrying, settling down in a nice little place, having a couple o' nippers. Miles from anywhere. Birds, and bees, and the old lawn-mower going,

and the missus cutting flowers for the dining-room. Don't you think that I don't know what's what, young Barwood. I got it all cut and dried. And that's the way this cock-eyed world goes round. You meet up with a girl who's made to measure and you can't do nothink about it."

"You could have," pointed out Jim Barwood, "in olden times."

"What d'you mean, olden times? "

"I read a piece in a book about how they used to go out and grab a girl with a stone axe."

"The good old days, eh? First come first served. By ginger, I'd axe forty men to get hold of a wife like her. She's lovely. She give me a smile this morning that fair made me dance. Thank you so much, steward, she says. Pleasant as a fine day. But where's that get me? Not at all, madam—that's what I've got to say, when all the time I'm busting to lick her shoes. Well, there you are. What's it boil down to when all's said and done? This, o' man: that some's born to take their pleasure and others to work their guts out. I.S.D.—that's the secret. If I was a moneyed man I'd be pressing the button instead of answering the bell. I'd be sitting down to dinner in this saloon making the running with as nice a lady as ever breathed. Life? It's more than a ruddy mystery, it's a stinking scandal."

"That's what Mr. Puckle said to me yes'dy," observed Jim Barwood. "He said: Life's a mess, son, and you're all the time cleaning it up."

For a moment Albert Sims was motionless, absorbed. Suddenly, he drove a fist into his palm.

"Got it! " he cried. "Puckle. Do you know I've had his face on my mind ever since we put to sea? I knew damn well I'd seen that clock somewhere before. The P. & O.s. He had a moustache then, that's why I couldn't place him. He used to work the P. & O.s regular—one of the card-sharpping brigade he was, and if I know anythink about human nature he'd double-cross his own mother."

Jim Barwood looked struck. "What are you going to do. Tell the owner?"

"What do you take me for? No names, no pack-drill. He's a guest on board, ain't he? I keep my place. Go shove your nose into that sort of pie and the first thing you know it's nipped off. No, I'm not telling any owners, and no more are you. But there's nothing to stop us from keeping our eyes open. If——"

Albert Sims dried up abruptly as his eye lifted towards the ventilator in the ceiling. With the top unscrewed it formed an open funnel. And, by some trick of the wind on deck, the funnel gave out words. The steward leaped to his feet, motioned his assistant to be silent, cocked a careful ear.

Women, said the voice of Herbert French, never know where to stop. Why in God's name won't they take no for an answer? I'm in danger of arrest, a heavy sentence, prison, ruination.

2

In a low voice Albert Sims said: "Lock that door. Clear this muck off the table—hurry up."

Jim Barwood having swiftly cleared the table, in a trice the steward was mounted on it. He could now put his head close up to the funnel, which he did without loss of time. News like this, he judged, was of the kind which
"nobody but a fool would disregard. And Jim Barwood, fascinated by this sudden turn of events, with a look of gaping stupidity on his face, stood with glass in one hand and cloth in the other, straining his ears to catch whole sentences on the breast of the fitful wind, and snaring only odd words.

They had been hearing snatches of conversation from above for some time without trying to identify the sense; it had been an *obligato* to their own talk which had passed unheeded by Albert Sims, who was not normally curious to investigate the business of others, until Herbert French,

raising his voice, had let forth the nature of his fear.

And now, whilst the water slapped, and thumped, and hissed against the porthole, Albert Sims listened in a trance to his first crook story from the mouth of the culprit. And he listened with a growing excitement. With no talent for devious doings himself, the story as it grew fell upon his ears with all the allurements of three thousand pounds for a man who had never handled half as many hundreds in his life. And whilst his brain received the sense of what was being said on deck his imagination embroidered all the dreams of happiness he had ever known with new and hitherto unconsidered enticements. For the first time in his life he was cheek by jowl with wealth; it was here, in the ship, within ten paces of his pantry. Moreover, he was already persuading himself that stealing at a second remove was not downright theft; if anyone was going to be a loser, that someone would not be Herbert French. It would be Mrs. Harriwell, who was worth a million and more, to whom three thousand pounds would mean no more than a couple of shillings to a poor devil like himself.

When they had finished he got down from the table without a word, reached his seat like a man walking in his sleep. The palms of his hands were damp. Albert Sims could only remember feeling like this once before in his life, and that was when he started running a crown-and-anchor board with his last ten shillings and finished the night with fifty pounds in his pocket.

He tried to picture three thousand one-pound notes, and failed utterly. But he could picture what he would do with some of them very well. Twenty years of waiting on the rich had instilled into his breast a desire to lift himself up, to walk easily in pleasant places, to give that certain innate refinement a chance to flower, to cut loose from the hideous little house in the grimy street to which he must ever return so long as he was a steward. What Albert Sims wanted—and wanted all at once with a burning passion—was the right to say good morning over his own hedge to

the gnarled oldsters of some gracious village with a chorus of lambs bleating in the background and the slow sun making pearls of the young corn-ears.

And he wanted a rest. He wanted to lie in bed and be fussed over with toast and marmalade; to see high heaven from his bedroom window, and the rooks winging their placid way to the rich fields.

He wanted, in short, happiness, and he saw happiness in the shape of things to come; could hear it knocking at the door, feel it tingling in his skin. Jim Barwood finished the glasses, asked for further orders, received no answer. Albert Sims, who had never thought to steal so much as a pinch of salt, was thinking about the theft of a lifetime. The job bristled with dangers. At crime, without a doubt, he was a crashing amachoor.

CHAPTER NINE

With the Mask Off

1

FOR THE PAST twenty years Mrs. Weiss had gone to and fro in the world triumphantly vindicating the power of money. Money had always procured for her the best rooms at the best hotels, the front seats at all the exclusive shows, the richest delicacies out of season, the attention of head waiters, the cringing servility of Hindoos, Italians, of all the oppressed races to whom *baksheesh* is as manna dropped from heaven. Relieved from the necessity of having to exercise her mind in order to earn a living, she wrote traveller's cheques and gathered together a rag-bag of memories composed of smiles, bows, salaams, the flavours of caviare, plover's eggs, truffles and ortolans, improbable stinks sampled in the backwaters of foreign ports, moments passed on the backs of elephants and camels, or behind the

brown men of the East running between the shafts of rick-shaws. Most of what was poured into her sieve-like mind seeped away and was lost, but, inevitably, there was a residue, and out of this residue she fished up odd scenes and strung them haphazardly together to make travel-talks for the edification of her less-fortunate sisters in the Women's Rotary.

And, in the present instance, money, to the extent of an extra two hundred pounds, had bought her the best cabin in the ship. The cabin was marked *Owner*. Ordinarily, Dunne would have been using it himself. The owner's cabin was larger by half than any other, it had two port-holes, genuine linenfold panelling, a five-foot wardrobe, a Persian carpet of great age and beauty, and the signed photographs of several foreign royalties inscribed to the late Sir John Withers. These latter had clinched the matter for Mrs. Weiss. If she dearly loved a lord her feeling for the heads of states was akin to worship. To undress before kings and princes, in the very room which had, no doubt, contained their fleshly presence—the mere idea made her eyes smart with emotion. Why, one of them might have slept in this very bed! And at this thought sudden ecstasy transfigured her fifty odd years with youth.

"Mr. Dunne—I love this room. I guess this is what I've been looking for all my life."

She made her offer. Dunne, somewhat surprised, made no bones about accepting it. His years of comparative poverty had taught him the value of money, and he'd be a fool, he decided, to refuse two hundred pounds so easily earned.

Later, she made an offer for the photographs, for she had noticed that they were all inscribed, in the most cordial terms, to "Bim." It was a nickname that might apply equally well to a woman, and she could conceive of no greater glory than to be able to boast of being on nickname terms with half the crowned heads of Europe. But, if Dunne was staggered at the figure mentioned, he decided

that a halt must be called to the gallop of vulgarity. Always polite, he said, with a grin:

"I don't think we'd better remove them, Mrs. Weiss. Wouldn't it be a sort of *lèse-majesté*? In any case, they were given to Sir John Withers, and I feel sure he wouldn't wish them to go out of the family."

2

Now, standing before an ample mirror in this cabin *de luxe*, Mrs. Weiss tugged at the front lacing of her corset. With each tug she followed the instructions of her corsetiere, breathing in through the nose and out through the mouth. She had what is euphemistically known as a full figure; there was no nonsense about her bust, it had the fine spectacular sweep of a hill-side. As for her legs, they were magnificently suitable for carrying weight, with calves that looked as if they must burst through the stockings, and they had large dimples on either side of the knees.

She was a well-preserved fifty. Bright blue eyes flanking a Roman nose set over lips which had a very full pout and a habit of holding her head well back gave her an imperious look. Her hair was blonde, plentiful, and naturally curly. Her hands were plump, large, and dimpled at the knuckles, and she had a smile which she flashed on and off with the suddenness of electricity.

Having subdued the rondures of her stomach she sat down, panting a little, and fell into a reverie. She thought about Dunne with his guardsman's waist and fine shoulders, his easy manners, attractive grin, quizzical eyes, the aristocratic chiselling of his features, that indefinable something which marked him out as a gentleman, and his courteous way with servants that sent them hurrying to do his bidding. She thought about a wedding at St. Margaret's, Westminster, and was thrilled. The flowers, the earls and the dowagers, the photographs in the *Tatler* (Mrs. Cyrus Weiss, the mother of the bride, who has recently bought the Vander-

loon mansion on Fifth Avenue), the background of Bredon with its ancient yews, its matured lawns, its antique stones on which one might lay a hand and evoke the feeling of the Jacobites and sense the march of dynasties. And she sighed. If only Ida was more like herself. Ida was difficult. She was unnatural. She was perverse. At this juncture the door opened to let in Ida herself.

Ida was smoking a cigarette. She had bathed. Her complexion had the delicate and flawless bloom of a baby's. Her dark eyes travelled first to the photographs on the panelled bulkheads, and then, mockingly, to her mother.

"Well, momma," she said, "and how's royalty this morning? To me they just look like any bunch of hoboes. Can you see any difference between this Engelberg guy and the man who calls for the empties?"

"Prince Engelberg," said Mrs. Weiss, "comes of a very ancient——"

"Sure he does," interrupted Ida. "Way back to Nebuchadnezzar by the look of his nose. And his eyes. He looks like a sick owl. If that's a prince of the blood royal give me a good, honest bum every time."

"Ida! You ought not to talk that way about——"

"Come down to earth, mom," put in Ida. "Why wouldn't I talk that way? Is it blasphemy, or something?"

Ida stubbed out her cigarette, helped herself to another from the box on the dressing-table, ran a playful finger around her mother's neck.

"Listen, Mrs. Weiss dear. For the inestimable privilege of gazing at this bunch of Italian shoe-shiners you set yourself back eight hundred dollars. For God's sake don't tell anybody. They'll think you're nuts. If pop was alive he'd throw fifty fits."

"Really, Ida. The way you talk to me. He wouldn't do anything of the kind. He adored me."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Oh, yeah." Mrs. Weiss recoiled from the words as if they were nauseous medicine. "Is that the way to express

yourself? Oh, yeah. It's the height of vulgarity. I hope you won't ever let Mr. Dunne hear you."

"What's special about Mr. Dunne? And let me tell you, mamma darling, that pop adored you with reservations. You know very well this snob complex of yours used to give him the stomach-ache."

"I won't have you talk to me like that. It's intolerable. And I'll tell you what's special about Mr. Dunne. He's a splendid type of young Englishman. You must have noticed, Ida, how—huh!—distinguished he looks."

"Sure I have. I had a talk with him last night. He took me up on the bridge."

Mrs. Weiss suddenly dropped her lipstick. Joy flooded into her eyes, incarnadined her cheeks.

"Ida! Fancy that now. And you never told me. What did you talk about?"

Ida, looking into the mirror, was greeted with her mother's arch smile, the slightly roguish look of the match-maker, a face alight with eagerness.

"Were you wearing the Chanel perfume?"

Ida hooted with glee. "Listen, Mrs. Weiss dear. I was wearing my Chanel perfume, and my Belgian hand-embroidered step-ins, and my Lanvin stockings, brassiere by Bienjolie, corset by Paz, frock by Patou, and what-have-you. Altogether I guess they made a first-class smell. But Mr. Dunne never looked like it was getting him down. He talked about the binnacle, and the engine-room telegraph, and how he would like to be a navigator, and Mr. Brindle joined in."

"Who's Mr. Brindle?"

"A nice little guy, sort of wistful, and pathetic. Yes, I guess he's nice, but dumb, with a kind of pleading look like a collie dog. Oh, and he's an officer—first mate."

"Did you get along all right with Mr. Dunne?"

"You didn't expect me to fall out with him did you? I guess I get along with everybody."

"But surely, Ida, you didn't talk about binnacles and—er—engine-room things all the time?"

"Well, for crying out loud——"

"Ida!" Mrs. Weiss pronounced her daughter's name in a tone of anguish. "Must you use that kind of expression? I do hope you didn't talk that way to Mr. Dunne." Impulsively Mrs. Weiss took her daughter's hand. "*Please* dear, Momma doesn't like it."

"O.K. In future such words shall only be heard when Ida doesn't like momma. And now we'll go on from the binnacles and engine-room things. I seem to get the idea that it's pretty important for you to know if Mr. Dunne happened to mention that the night air was chilly or whether Mr. Brindle brought his sister into the conversation. They did, and in that order."

Mrs. Weiss sighed. That Mr. Dunne should have chosen to take Ida on the bridge when he could have taken that French girl or Miss Letts, not to mention Lady Eleanor, seemed to her remarkable enough to be counted as a favourable omen. How unfortunate, she thought, that my happiness should be bound up with the caprice of a wilful child. She said:

"Ida dear. I do wish you'd be serious."

"Life is real, life is earnest? Snap out of it, Mrs. Weiss darling."

"Please, Ida. What I'm going to say is for your own good."

"No, momma. What I'm going to hear is your notion of what's good for me, and your notion almost certainly won't be mine."

"My notion is that it would be good for you to marry."

Ida's immediate reply to this was a short laugh. After a pause, she said, mocking as ever:

"Sure it would be good for me. Too good to be true, I guess. Ida, the bachelor's nightmare."

Mrs. Weiss ignored this. She went on:

"Looks aren't everything. You can be very charming

if you like, Ida. As for your figure, well, it's my experience that men look at the legs first and the face afterwards. I know I've said all these things before, and——"

"Momma," said Ida, "there goes the breakfast bell. I'm not dressed. Suppose I tell you what's on your mind. The happiest day of your life will be the day when you've gotten yourself a blue-blooded son-in-law. Your idea of music is the voice of an English butler saying dinner is served, my lord, with you as one of the diners. You read all about Mr. Dunne's legacy in the papers, you know he hasn't got enough money to run this yacht, and you think he'll fall for two hundred thousand pounds. Isn't that so?"

Mrs. Weiss flushed. "Really, Ida, I've never been spoken to in my life——"

"Hold your horses, Mrs. Weiss dear. It'll do us both good to clear the air a bit. Re Mr. Dunne. I like him. I think he's a regular guy, I think he's swell. If that gives you any peace of mind you're welcome to it. Admitted, two hundred thousand pounds is a whole lot of money, but I'm a whole lot of homeliness. So if I were you, momma, I wouldn't go shouting any hosannas. Let it sweat. Relax, darling, relax. See what I mean?"

3

Alone in her cabin, Ida sat down behind a locked door, the prey to oppressive thoughts, her face overcast with a degree of sadness which she kept only for her private moments. The mocking mask was put away, the eyes which but a few moments before had been lit with a sardonic sparkle held now only the dark gleam of a painful grief, as, motionless, with clenched hands, she bowed her head and heard again in fancy the cries of "monkey-face" and saw the crude drawings labelled Ida Weiss on the slates of her schoolmates. Those days were past, they were pain recollected in tranquillity, and she had learned in adolescence to steel herself against attacks perhaps less fierce but

equally wounding; the curious glances, the whispers, the looks of pity, the scraps of conversation overheard. And, at last, taking herself in hand, trying desperately to shake off misery, she had covered her sensitive nature with a mask of self-mockery and forced herself to joke about her shortcomings. But there were moments, as now, when her spirit writhed in a dark loneliness, when every tick of the clock seemed to toll away the seconds with a finality that promised only loneliness to the end.

She wept without sound, with the tears falling unheeded as she looked at her face with the hopelessness of despair and hated her lot with a rebelling bitterness. Under the oddity of her exterior there smouldered the feelings of a sensual woman, the hunger of a healthy organism for its proper fulfilment, and she counted the weeks as they passed with an ever-growing recession of hope that sometimes approached dread as she numbered off all the marriages of her friends and saw ahead of her her twenty-sixth birthday.

She thought, too, of her mother. Such affection as she had for her was tinctured with contempt; snobbishness was for her an ugly blotch on character; she could, with the best will in the world, only regard her as an empty simpleton, even a vicious simpleton who would without a qualm sacrifice the happiness of anybody else to forward her own aggrandizement, and throw away as much money as might keep a working family for six months in order to gratify her own sottishness.

And she thought of Dunne. Well did she know that she couldn't crush down the feeling that rose up. It leaped in her breast like a punishing blow. With a sudden movement she took up her hairbrush, began fiercely to brush out her curls.

CHAPTER TEN

Correspondence For Captain Sale

1

FROM UNDER the stretched awning the passengers observed the near approach of Gibraltar, its rocky fist laid down upon the water as a sign of the strict intention behind it. The *Aphrodite* rounded the mole in a flurry of wind and rain, but by the time her anchor went down the face of the harbour was glistening with the polish of an unimpeded sun. In the first motor-boat (of which the yacht carried two) the steward went ashore to forage for fresh meat and vegetables, along with Mr. Puckle, whose intention it was to transact urgent business in Gibraltar, and return, if possible, a jump ahead of the other guests. With the one exception of Mrs. Weiss the ladies, all dressed for the street, looked chic to a degree; Ida Weiss, indeed, looked ravishing from behind, and, face to face, under the sweep of a fetching hat, her sparkling eyes and her teeth like chips of white porcelain did much to improve her Maker's handiwork in other directions. Mr. Wix, in a blue pin-stripe suit, looked satisfactory and trustworthy like Consols, the lions in Trafalgar Square, or Carter Patersons. Herbert French, inevitably crowned with a bowler hat, managed a near approach to cheerfulness; Mr. Wix had for the time being bucked him up and induced him to let go some of the dead weight of worry and apprehension that he had brought with him from Number Eight King Street. Although he had allowed himself to be persuaded to go ashore, he would much have preferred to remain aboard, with his eyes fixed on the succour of Port Said and the British Overseas Airways.

Mr. Wix's plan seemed to Herbert French very feasible. The miniatures, addressed to Mrs. Harriwell, were to be flown to Croydon and mailed thence by registered post—a

scheme, as Mr. Wix had pointed out, that would let him out entirely as a suspect. So far so good. Herbert French was sensible of relief, but not peace of mind; that could not be his until he had seen the things safely despatched at Port Said, and meantime he must live in a kind of vacuum, a waiting period pricked by small fears of disaster. He had read about Port Said at some time in the distant past, and, in conjunction with the vision of a plane taking off into a glaring sky, he carried at the back of his mind a confused medley of Arabs, black men from Nubia, fierce moustachios from Greece, the ferment of a various life throwing off barbaric colours, dark eyes shining from the shadowed doorways of brothels in sinister alleyways. From time to time he peered at this picture with all his attention, as if by mere earnestness he could overcome the obstacles of time and distance. No, he would not be at rest until he saw with his own eyes the reality of British Overseas Airways.

"That bowler hat, old boy," said Mr. Wix, breaking in on his thoughts, "all right here maybe, but in the tropics—terrible. What you need is a topee. Terrific sun out East, I understand. Hits you like a pole-axe. A topee, and a couple or three or four white suits—doesn't he, Lady Eleanor?"

A brilliant smile, the splendour of vitality in two dark eyes. Herbert French advanced a step nearer to cheerfulness.

"Perhaps," she said, "Mr. French came away in a hurry? That was rather wise. You'll save pounds. Those things are awfully cheap in Gibraltar."

"You've been here before, Lady Eleanor?" asked Mrs. Weiss. "Then you'll know Pablo's bar? Maybe you'll stop off there and take a cocktail with me?"

"I certainly will," replied Lady Eleanor. "And perhaps you'll allow me to return it at the Parroquet?"

"And then," Dunne chipped in, "you'll all come with me to Santovanis."

"Lovely," approved Kay French. "Wixy, you'll have to cherish me. I shall be talkative, and indiscreet, and full of giggles."

Delight moved in Mr. Wix as he allowed his eyes to rest on her. From the crown of her hat to the tips of her French shoes she was the perfection of style; she would have given distinction, he thought, to the contents of a rag-bag. In the moment that their glances met and held she flashed at him a playful grimace, a split-second almost imperceptible movement of eyes and lips which invoked in him a delicious and exciting shock. She was as she stood there in her electric vitality the crystallization of all his undefined longings, of the illusive bliss of dreams and the lost happiness of unnumbered yesterdays. Mr. Wix looked away at the Rock, at the face of the harbour busy with small craft, at the cranes stooping over coal-barges on the distant jetty and the gulls interweaving in a slow saraband above the cloud of black dust. And, coincident with delight, he suffered a pang of regret for his wasted days.

And now they moved towards the accommodation ladder and trooped down into the motor-boat. In a wide curve it turned and headed for the shore. Captain Sale, alone on the bridge, gave them a flourish of his cap. And then, taking from his pocket two letters which the tender had brought off from the jetty, he opened the door of the chart-room and passed inside.

2

There were taxis, there were mule-drawn cabs, there were bleating goats in the streets and a superfluity of monkeys up to high jinks in the plentiful foliage. Mr. Puckle was only subconsciously aware of these manifestations of life; the people, the flora and the fauna existed for him only as a dim shadow-show; with his brow creased in thought he walked purposefully up the road flanked with wild olives and stone-pines into the town. He was contemplating amongst other things the benefits inherent in such

a sum as three thousand pounds, and already he was savouring the blessed feeling of rest which follows hard labours, of peace in a safe anchorage, of the ease and plenty which was the reward of judicious enterprise.

It looked very much as if he was due for a lucky break at last. There was no question here of risk, none of those finical niceties which had to be carefully worked out before the busting of a safe or the operation of a smash-and-grab. This job was straightforward, a simple exercise for tiptoes, nifty hands, and wary eyes, with all anxiety about cops entirely removed. This guy French was himself a crook; if somebody grabbed the loot off him he'd be in a cleft stick—he could hardly raise a stink about stolen property. Nevertheless, Mr. Puckle was taking no chances; there loomed in the background the figure of Mr. Wix behind whose simple geniality there might very well reside an unsuspected reserve of unpleasantness.

He was recalled to immediate things by feminine voices upraised from a passing taxi, and catching sight of Lady Eleanor's smile as she and her party were borne away in a cloud of dust, he waved a hand. Mrs. Weiss, sitting bolt upright and facing the rear, favoured him with an unsmiling haughtiness; already on board the ship she had discouraged his breeziness with icy stares, and there arose in Mr. Puckle's mind an unprintable epithet as his own smile was wiped away. Who did she think she was, the fat old cow? And at this there suddenly reached out from the past the brawny arms and fiery cockatrice eyes of his wife from whom he had fled these ten years, and to whom, he realized with a mild shock, he was being borne nearer with every yard of the yacht's progress. For a while Mr. Puckle dwelt on the circumstances of his life with Bridget O'Gorman, who had changed overnight from a smiling easiness into the wild-eyed wraths of religious mania. He shuddered. The last he had heard of Bridget she was carrying the torch of the Lord into the darkness of the East; the duties of a missionary had claimed her immortal soul, and

she was vaguely located on one of the many islands south of China and west of Borneo.

He had reached the town now, with his eyes alertly about him, looking for a certain kind of shop. Shoes, corsets, underwear, Fray Bentos, Scotch whisky, typewriters, automatic pistols, intimate surgical garments: Mr. Puckle cursed all commerce as he pounded the hot pavements. But, at last, he came on what he was seeking. *Constantine Xemenos*, he read on the sign over the window, *Sports Goods and Hardware, Agent for Hobby's Fretwork*. Mr. Puckle passed inside; he didn't see the steward, who was conversing in the back regions. "Yes, gentleman," said a voice, and there emerged from behind a stack of bamboo poles a mincing figure, jingling with bracelets, all smirking girlishness and wavy hair. He halted abruptly, inclined himself forward from the hips. "What do you chooce, plceace?"

Mr. Puckle laid hands on a sheet of three-ply board.

"Can you cut this for me?"

"But yes, gentleman. Anysing at all. You are from ship? I haf very pleasing line in deck-quoits. Or you play muscecc? See."

Mr. Xemenos seized an accordion, made wide flamboyant sweeps with it, produced two or three unmusical yelps from its stretched bellows, thrust it towards Mr. Puckle.

"Fratellini," he explained. "Good make. Very sharming. You try?"

"Listen, buddy," said Mr. Puckle, "I want some three-ply wood. Got a saw?"

3

Captain Sale, in a pleasant glow of anticipation, laid his cap on the chart-room desk and stretched himself full length on the settee. A lover-like technique, you would say, was beyond his compass; with his powerful wrists, his look of burly efficiency and salt-water toughness, his bluff, business-

like air of the sea, the tender side of the man was lost. But now, having read the postmarks on his envelopes, his spirit reached out first to Port Said and then to Bombay, his heart was divided in equal portions between Madeleine and Sadie, his eye was softened with fondness, the lines on his forehead were smoothed away, and his whole face wore the pattern of affection. More than ever in its pinkness did it look baby-like and endearing.

Captain Sale had never married. A woman's man, he preferred to enrich himself with many memories rather than confine himself to one. His encounters with women had been many and various; playful interludes taken up with joy and laid aside with a regret that had always faded within a week to pleasant recollection of things said and done with the inamorata of the moment, of shining eyes meeting his over the rim of a glass, of perfumes, and red lips, and welcoming arms. He had never yet met the woman who had enchained him beyond his strength, and although he had in the last few years of his free lancing ever looked about for a likely partner with whom to set up house, his scarch was half-hearted, and grew more so as the days went on.

He looked first at Sadie's writing, bold, frank, and dashing like herself, and he visualized anew her red hair, her *retroussé* nose, the abandonment of her laugh with head thrown back to display her lovely neck, the wanton wink of her Pagan eye, and her talent for mimicry. A strapping creature with limbs fashioned for a hundred-day march, the product of generations of farmers with a stride like a guardsman and a tiger's supple vigour, she stamped whatever she did with the hallmark of her inimitable personality.

Captain Sale had met her at a dance in Port Said. Despite the imperfection of her nose, she was looking superb in black chiffon velvet. He watched her dancing, observed the sway of her magnificent back, the long-lashed eyes half-closed in the sweet languor of the waltz—he

examined these matters with a growing excitement, and when, with the waltz finished, she gave him a long glance as she walked to her table Captain Sale knew beyond doubt that here was a milestone on the blissful road of his adventuring.

At last, with a deep chuckle, he opened her letter, and read:

Darling—my own baby-faced, bald-headed darling. So you are flying to Port Said on the wings of Aphrodite. Imagine you doing polite offices on a gentleman's yacht. It gives me one big laugh. Or have you got a repertoire of drawing-room tricks that I don't know about? I shall expect to find you all transmogrified when you show up in these wicked parts—a mincing shopwalker with manicured nails and Nuit de Paris on your handkerchief. Well, if you bring me anything else but your own simple shipshape-ness, I'll kick. Sweet simplicity, that's all I want from Captain Ted.

There's no news, unless the fact that I've changed my job is news. I'm secretary to one Percival Pittock, who works for the British and Foreign Bible Society. Can you imagine your ever-loved (I hope) Sadie cramping her style with the Ten Commandments? For the rest, this place is still overrun with wops and dagoes and what-have-you. One day, when I can save some pennies, I'm going to bust right out of this Middle East and seek some fresh outlet for my talents. Or maybe you could help, baa-lamb. Couldn't you rustle up a job for me with the owner of Aphrodite?

Meantime, I await your arrival. Yours as ever,

SADIE.

And now he turned to Madeleine. Madeleine was chic, Madeleine was a pocket Venus with the fragility of Venetian glass and the daintiness of a painting by Fragonard. Madeleine called him uncle, and rubbed perfume on his bald head. Madeleine, indeed, was a fascinating toy, a

chuckling playmate who contrived happy excursions for their recurring meetings. And Madeleine wrote:

This morning a letter from my very special Uncle Ted, my formidable Uncle Ted.

The so small niece is well, she has joie de vivre to know that her sweet uncle comes from over the sea, she says to herself all the time: soon, Madeleine de Cherimée, you will be seeing that lovely wicked man. That is good. It is a thought that I think to myself in the shop of Chung Soo, in the boulevards, and when I go to sleep. Do you not know it will make my heart to sing when you arrive to Bombay? I shall give you my hand to kiss.

For the rest, my cabbage, I have a new suit, very chic, la haute couture, and a hat which makes me to look like someone very naughty. And now I say au revoir. The so red place where I have made a mark is my kiss. The good God protect you.

MADELEINE.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Mr. Brindle Makes a Rug

AFT ON THE BRIDGE-DECK by the ship's bell was a ladder, and at the bottom of the ladder was a second deck along which ran the alleyway between the officers' cabins. Aft of these cabins the deck projected about four feet or so where it was bounded by a rail. Placed on this four-foot strip was a deck-chair, and in the deck-chair was Mr. Brindle. By his side was a waste-paper basket full of brightly coloured snippets of wool, and on his knee was an oblong trellis-work of canvas.

Mr. Brindle was making a rug. Rug-making was his sole hobby; ever since he had first shipped to sea he had applied his industrious nature to the making of rugs. From Rotter-

dani to the River Plate, from Banjerniassin to Liverpool port—not a trade-route in all the seven seas that had not been dotted at some time or another with Mr. Brindle's clippings. 'Tons of wool, acres of canvas, prodigies of patience—Mr. Brindle had in his time carpeted the Crystal Palace and be-rugged the Albert Hall.

It was a fine, handsome day, real lubber's weather, with the sea blue as cornflowers and smooth as a woman's skin. Away to starboard the sun throbbed in a gracious sky; astern, the wake of the *Aphrodite* lay upon the water white like a dusty road, and the smoke from her funnel, be-sooting the clean air for miles astern, remained as the only flaw in what Mr. Brindle considered was a mighty pleasant picture.

He worked with the speed of an expert. The instrument which he was using—a steel beak with a round wooden handle—pecked at the contents of the basket with the precise busyness of a hen amongst corn, and each woollen thrum was tweaked into place with the neatness of a new toy.

Most of the time Mr. Brindle's mind was at rest, lulled into an agreeable blankness by the soothing motions of his facile hands. But, occasionally, a thought popped up, lived a brief life, and faded out. His thoughts were not very exciting; he had no stirring memories to draw upon; his life at sea had been all of the same sober pattern, endless watch-keeping in a variety of vessels, endless landfalls and departures, fogs in the North Atlantic, storms in the China Seas, icebergs on the Grand Banks. Getting up, and doing his duty, and going to bed after entering the necessary items in the log—that was how life presented itself in retrospect to Mr. Brindle; pleasant enough, but joyless, unmarked by red-letter days, unrelieved by light and shade, unswetened by the rewards of friendship. Not that Mr. Brindle was disagreeable, or standoffish, or morose; he was, when you came to know him, an uncommonly soft-spoken and sociable sort of man who kept candy in his pocket for children when

there were children about, and little biscuits for dogs when dogs were abroad. He was broad and well set-up, he had a certain sort of ruggedness of feature which, if not good looks, was extraordinarily attractive when lit by his shy smile. But he had been dogged all his life by an impediment of the speech; a long pause before embarking on a word, a painful, gulping effort to compose his face: it was distressing, it drove him in upon himself, and a most likeable man was lost behind a barrier of silence, speaking only when he was spoken to, and then confining himself strictly to short sentences. In his younger days it had been pretty tough for Mr. Brindle. Sailors have never been remarkable for the finer feelings, and a succession of ship's wags had made great play with his sudden gulp, the transient distortion of his features as he fought for speech. However, with maturity, his affliction grew kinder; neither the distortion nor the gulp was so pronounced, talking had become less of an adventure, though still fraught with pitfalls. That he had risen to the position of first mate (he carried an extra master's ticket) was a tribute to his tenacity; whatever else Mr. Brindle was, he had all the attributes of a sterling seaman.

All unknown to Mr. Brindle, Ida Weiss was sitting immediately above him on the bridge-deck. From time to time she leaned forward and looked down, for his expert handling of this rug-business was fascinating to watch. Also the pattern appealed to her; the rug-maker was building a cottage in a fenced field; already he had planted a tree therein, a gay, stylized tree of vivid green, and another was quickly growing under his swift fingers. Finally she advanced to the top of the ladder. Mr. Brindle heard a footstep, looked up.

"Hello there," she said. "May I come and watch?"

The first mate stood up. "Why, of course, miss. Be careful of the steps. They're rather awkward for lady's shoes."

He hastened to get a deck-chair, dodged into his cabin

at the run and brought out a cushion. He wasn't used to people noticing him; his shipmates left him to his own devices. Immured in a vast loneliness, Mr. Brindle made rugs, jolly rugs with galumphing steeds, gay rugs with birds, and butterflies, and blotches of sheer spirited colour. Ida Weiss cried out with delight.

"Say, you didn't tell me you were accomplished. Windows and chimneys and a porch and what have you. I guess I'd be tickled to death to live right in that field. However do you do it?"

"Oh, I don't know. I suppose it's second nature. When you've made as many as I have——"

He adjusted her chair. "That all right?"

"Fine." She looked round. "Mercy, I'm all amongst the engineer's bathrooms and things. Am I trespassing?"

"Not here," said Mr. Brindle. "This is reserved for the rug-making department. You do smoke, don't you?"

"No, no. Have one of mine."

Mr. Brindle took her offered light, smelled the vaguest of perfumes in the cup of her hands.

"You must forgive me," he said, "if I don't scintillate. I'm not used to entertaining ladies."

"Don't worry, Mr. Brindle. I guess you'll make the grade."

"In fact," he went on, "I don't remember the last time——"

"As bad as that?" She laughed. "You must have had a busy life. You're not training for a monk, or anything?"

He chuckled. "Oh, no."

"Do you dance any?"

Mr. Brindle pecked perfunctorily at his coloured wools, topped the green tree with another thrum, and considered it. Away on the horizon smoke plumed and trailed. He fixed his eyes upon it with an expression of such sombre wistfulness that she was stirred to sympathy. The Captain, she knew, was rather inclined to be impatient with his first mate, and the rest of the officers, whether playing cards,

or deck-quoits, or just yarning, left him out. At last:

"I'm afraid I don't know the first thing about it," he confessed. "You see, I—well, I'm not much fun."

"That's O.K. with me," said Ida Weiss. "We're getting along fine. Wouldn't you like to learn? There's a dance on to-night in the saloon. We can hear the music on deck. If you like I'll slip up and teach you. Isn't that kind of me?"

"Kind? Miss Weiss, it's more than kind. It's——"

"Boloney, Mr. Brindle. It's just that I'm scared stiff I won't get a partner. Can you see the boys all fighting to handle Ida in the waltz?"

Mr. Brindle looked at her. His eye was not like that of other men. For him, she was the first woman who had ever bothered, a felicitous decoration to a fine afternoon. He said:

"I personally would fight anybody for the honour."

"Well," she bantered, "this is my lucky day. I guess you must have been out in the sun. Tell me some more. I'm not used to flattery."

Slowly he fished about in his basket of colours, inserted another thrum.

"I'm not used to it either. I've never flattered anybody in my life. It's pretty wonderful, having you sit here and talk to me. The first time it's ever happened. All these years——"

"Well," she encouraged, "what have you been doing with yourself all these years?"

"Doing?"

His eyes, inward-looking, peered down the avenue of the past, and it seemed to Mr. Brindle that it was carpeted with wool, with millions and millions of thrums, thick as moss, neat as militiamen. He gave a short laugh.

"Rugs," he said. "Making rugs. I suppose that sounds just crazy. But, apart from watch-keeping, that's been my life. I guess I hold the record for rug-making. Hundreds and hundreds."

"And what do you do with them when they're made?"

"Oh, give them away."

She brushed her hand over the soft pile. "They're beautiful."

"Not too bad," admitted the craftsman, modestly. "I suppose——"

He hesitated.

"Yes?"

"You wouldn't care to accept——"

"Wouldn't I? Say—you just try me. I'd love it. That little cottage, it's cuter than Christmas. Thanks a lot, Mr. Brindle, thank you very much indeed. Do you know what I'll do when I'm feeling all washed-up? I'll just crawl in the front door and peek out the window at those trees. Heavens, is that the tea-bell? I'll have to scram."

She arose. At the top of the ladder she paused.

"Don't forget—nine-thirtyish."

For some time Mr. Brindle remained staring at the place where she had disappeared. When he resumed his rug-making he found himself putting in the wrong thrums. He began to tease them out. It had been, he thought, an extraordinary afternoon.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Mr. Brindle in the Dance

1

TWO GINS AND LIMES, one Martini, three brandies and soda, one Advocaat, one Cointreau. Albert Sims, coming out of the saloon with a tray of empty glasses, repeated the list of drinks with soundless lips and a scowl of absorption on his face. What with trying to keep track of his own work and fiddle out a way to riches at the same time, he was in a fair way to burst his brain. The trouble was that a chap

didn't get a chance to sit down quietly and think things out. Breakfast, luncheon, tea, dinner, every blessed cabin to be Hoovered out, beds to make, bed-linen to change, washing-up, cleaning, polishing—there was no end to it, and that screaming amachoor in the pantry enough to drive a man off his rocker, the way he fumbled like a ruddy farmer. And now this music in the saloon just when a chap wanted a bit of peace, and time flying away like galloping horses, going hell-for-leather with the only chance he'd ever get to help himself to a pay-day. Shoving open the pantry door with his foot he thrust in the tray upon Jim Barwood and began to count off the drinks.

"Two gins and lime. Got that?—two. Move yerself, o' man, and for Mike's sake don't slop 'em over the glasses. Three brandies and soda, three—one-two-three—understand? God save the King, I'd sooner 'ave a sick headache than you any day, o' man. One Martini, one Advocaat, one Cointreau, and you betcher sweet life I'll have to say it all over again. Horse-work, that's what it is, trying to make a steward out o' raw meat."

Whilst Jim Barwood fumbled, ham-handed, with the drinks Albert Sims stared distastefully at the colourful scene to be viewed through the glass doors of the saloon; at the pretty frocks swirling and swinging in the measured convolutions of the waltz. All very well for them, he thought, taking the carpet up, shifting the furniture, tearing the place to pieces—they didn't have to put it all to rights again. The face of Michael Dunne swung into view, was withdrawn, presented again, vanished behind the saloon bulkhead, and Albert Sims recalled a snatch of talk. "Oh, Sims—we shall be rather late to-night, we're going to dance. Do you mind?" Oh, no, he didn't mind. Why should he? Wasn't that what he was there for, to work all the hours God sent? "Mind, sir? Not at all. A pleasure." Sucking up to the owner in the hope of touching for an extra quid. Demeaning, that's what it was, five bob here, ten bob there, crumbs from the rich man's table.

It didn't occur to Albert Sims that he had never found it demeaning before; that, up till now, he had been reasonably satisfied with his lot. True, there had been occasions when he had kicked against the pricks; but, taking it by and large, he had whistled his way through life with a merry heart. And now . . .

He took the tray of drinks from Jim Barwood, splayed his fingers underneath, hoisted it to the level of his head. As he walked off the clock in the vestibule outside the saloon announced the quarter after nine, and something like fear stirred within him as he got a sense of time lost for ever, of hours and hours going down the drain with nothing done. Suddenly, a succession of sonsy pictures flashed across his mind; Dreamland at Margate, the May blossoms in Kent, a girl in a punt at Teddington, the thunder of hoofs at Newmarket, and he said to himself with a sombre conviction: "Sims, o' man, you're going to lose the run of a fortune if you ain't careful."

And now he was bending over Kay French. "Your Cointreau, madam." A smile, right into his eyes, the soft croon of a husky voice. "Thank you so much, steward. And will you take a drink to my brother in his cabin?"

They were all sitting down, laughing, chattering, and Albert Sims looked into each face as he served the drinks, into Lady Eleanor's dark eyes all a-glitter, that fat old fog-horn mother Weiss with a nose like a marlin-spike, the remote smile of Miss Letts, Ida Weiss with a mischievous come-and-play sort of look. And Albert Sims thought, as he considered the hook-nosed cunning of Mr. Puckle: "Here they all are, sitting down with Puckle. Haven't I as much right to be sitting here as him?"

And, like an ache at the back of his mind, the fact of three thousand pounds. Was that blasted brother going to stay in his cabin for a full-due?

Dunne called to him as he went out. "All right, Sims?"

"All right, sir."

"Good."

The saloon door swung to behind him, he moved swiftly along the corridor, tapped on a cabin door, was face to face with Herbert French.

"Your sister said I was to bring you a drink, sir. A gin and lime maybe? Brandy and soda?"

Herbert French put down his book. "Oh, I don't know, steward. I don't think——"

"A brandy and soda, sir. It'll do you good. I won't be one second."

Back again with the drink, Albert Sims found determination.

"Bcg pardon, sir—if you don't mind I'll just run over your cabin with the Hoover. It wasn't done this morning."

"What—now, steward?"

Albert Sims appraised him. He saw in Herbert French an object for contempt, derision, a poor, wet sap who leaned on his sister. He could be managed. Gently he laid a hand on the other's arm.

"Now just you go on deck, sir. I can't have you sleeping in a dirty cabin. Ten minutes and everything'll be O.K."

He caught a fleeting glance of Dunne and Ida Weiss moving in the grace of a tango as he hurried past the saloon. He burst into the pantry, unhooked the Hoover behind the door.

"Listen, useless," he said. "If the bell rings I'm in number six."

He closed the door behind him, plugged the Hoover in, started it up. Albert Sims hadn't much stomach for the risks of crime, and his hands trembled as he went through the drawers. There was nothing there, nothing in the wardrobe, nothing on top of it save a box which had contained shoes. Underneath the bunk were two suitcases, one unlocked, empty, the other locked and plainly full. In an excess of stupidity, he sat on his haunches, staring like a silly man. God's truth, there must be some way out? A tuppenny-ha'penny lock between him and three thousand

pounds? Quickly he tapped his pockets, pulled out a corkscrew, inserted it under the hasp, bent it double as he levered upwards. And then in a despairing and prayerful whisper:

"Oh, God!" he muttered. "'This is just damn silly. Gumption, o' man, gumption."

2

Two figures welded in a single grace, Dunne and Lady Eleanor revolved to the music of Strauss. Responsive to his every least movement, it seemed to Dunne that her feet made no contact with the floor, as if at every next moment she must rise and float ethereal. He said:

"You're rather clever. Light as air. Ounces instead of stones."

"It's my only accomplishment," she assured him.

"I'll swear it isn't. You can look most rapt under the eye of Mrs. Weiss. And that's an accomplishment in itself."

She giggled. "But I *am* rapt. I just sit and wonder if she's real. Isn't this a lovely waltz? It reminds me of all sorts of pleasures. The Ringstrasse in Vienna, the fountains, coffee with fat blobs of cream. Were you ever there?"

"Only in spirit. The flesh was always being mortified in Great Portland Street."

"What a shame."

"My dear Lady Eleanor, if it hadn't been so I shouldn't now be talking to you about Vienna."

"And is that something to write home about?"

"This dance will be memorable. I'm catching every moment as it flies."

"You're light-headed. Don't lose your sense of proportion. Tell me more."

"What about?"

"Your miserable past."

"It wasn't all misery. Eton counted for a great deal of

happiness. And afterwards—well, car-selling has its moments."

"Very rhapsodic, I imagine," she said dryly. "You've got rather a killing eye. Did you have a large fan-mail?"

He laughed. "Hardly that."

"It must be very satisfying to be adored."

"Well," said Dunne, "you ought to know something about it."

"Men with bowler hats in Portsmouth? I've often wondered what might have happened if I'd been more responsive. He'd have taken me to the pictures I expect, and then to a cup of tea in Lyons where he would have paid the bill out of an old leather purse."

"Why the leather purse?"

"Because he had a sad, careful face, and a dispirited moustache, and a shabby umbrella. Don't you think a leather purse rather completes the picture?"

"I'll bet," said Dunne, "he hasn't forgotten you. By the way: I believe I once sold your husband a car."

"I shouldn't be surprised. Did he pay for it?"

"Didn't he usually pay for things?"

"It was a point of honour with him not to pay, even for other men's wives. Have you ever been married, Mr. Dunne?"

"I've got that pleasure to look forward to."

"Don't."

"Don't what?"

"Look forward too much."

"Advice for the young?" he bantered.

"From an old hand. I should hate you to be disappointed."

"That's very nice of you. I don't intend to be."

She smiled. "The road to divorce is paved with good intentions. I suppose you would read about mine?"

"The newspapers," he said, "were very explicit. It's incredible, really."

"What is?"

"That you were so meek under provocation. You don't seem at all the kind of woman who would lie down to that sort of thing."

"It does seem mad, doesn't it? I suppose I loved him. He could be very charming on rare occasions."

"They must have been red-letter days."

"They were," said Lady Eleanor. "Most of the time he was just a Nazi. Justyn believed in discipline—for others. It was rather shocking. The first time he beat me—but there, I'm going all brooding and intense. A woman with a tragedy. It's unforgivable to unload one's emotions on to other people. Am I spoiling your evening?"

Dunne was looking a bit grim. It seemed to him monstrous, a horror, that so exquisite a creature should have been tied to an unmitigated swine.

"You're being very instructive," he told her, "about marriage. And rather horrifying. It doesn't seem possible that you've survived such a hell of an experience. It doesn't bear thinking about. One doesn't think of you as ordinary flesh and blood. You're so utterly fragile. Breakable, like Venetian glass or alabaster."

Lady Eleanor laughed. "My dear boy, you underestimate my powers of resistance. I'm surprisingly tough." She caught sight of Ida Weiss, exchanged smiles. "Would you like to do something for me? Do dance once more with that little Weiss girl. You were so lovely in the tango together. And I rather think you brighten her life."

3

There was a moon, there was the glory of the Milky Way, there were thousands of lesser stars, and when the resultant light fell 'ghostly upon her dark hair and her gleaming gown as she came to meet him, Mr. Brindle felt the strange awe of a man who sees visions and dreams of ineffable things.

"Hello, sailor," she said. "How're you doing?"

"Nicely, thanks," said Mr. Brindle. His eyes rested on the wonder of her white shoulders, her bare arms. "Are you sure," he asked, "you'll be warm enough?"

"I guess so," said Ida. "If I'm not you can be a little gentleman and get me a spare coat out of your cabin."

The deserted decks, the contented heave and sigh of the Mediterranean, the gentle lift and fall of the ship: Mr. Brindle had noted these circumstances many times before in his life, but never in conjunction with a lady in sequins and golden shoes. A great peace had come upon him, and a quiet happiness of the kind that he had experienced as a child cuddling its first puppy. He said:

"Thank you for coming. I didn't think you'd turn up."

"Why wouldn't I turn up?"

"Well, it wasn't very important that you should."

"You thought I'd make a promise and not keep it?"

"No, not that. I thought it might be difficult for you to get away."

"Anyway," said the girl, "you don't have to thank me for coming. I'm no Queen of Sheba, Mr. Brindle, and I guess this light suits my style of beauty a treat. Listen. Can you hear that music down below?"

"Oh, yes, I can hear it."

"Well, that's a fox-trot. Shall we wait until there's a waltz, or do you want to go right ahead?"

Mr. Brindle snatched with some relief at this chance of postponement.

"I think we'll wait," he said. "Maybe you'll be wanting a smoke first."

"Yes, I could use a smoke." Puffing at her cigarette, she giggled. "Wouldn't mamma be pleased. She'd pass right out if she knew I was up here."

"I expect," suggested Mr. Brindle, "she takes great care of you."

"Sailor dear," said Ida, "you've said a mouthful. Nobody could take greater care than mamma. She guards me like I was a sacred relic. And I guess I am the eighth

wonder of the world at that. I ought to have been born a black woman, Mr. Brindle, or in one of those Oriental joints where they wear veils."

"But why?" asked Mr. Brindle in all sincerity. For him she was by no means ugly. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder; and quite apart from any physical appeal, Mr. Brindle was for the first time in years lifted out of himself, free of that loneliness which had stunted his spiritual growth and made of him a man apart, a sad-seeming man who was fast growing into an old codger before his time. And Ida Weiss, knowing that his "why" was sincere, stared at him in all astonishment.

"Say," she said, "you're dopey. I guess that rug-making's put your eyes all out of focus. Maybe you think I'd make a good stand-in for Helen of Troy or Dante's Beatrice. That the way it is with you?"

For a moment Mr. Brindle silently stared at her, for she was between him and the moon, and a nimbus had fired her hair with pearly light, and her face in the shadow showed him nothing but the eager glow of two beautiful dark eyes. And he muttered:

"Yes, that's the way it is with me. You see. I'm no great shakes at grading beauty. I've never had the time for it." Mr. Brindle gave a short chuckle. "What with watch-keeping and rug-making." And then, serious again, he added: "But I do know that—that you fit into this hour as if you were made for it, and that I'll remember this night as long as I live."

Suddenly she turned away from him. Down below they had started a waltz, and Mr. Brindle was all at once watching the swirl of a gown about beautiful limbs with fascinated attention as she moved alone in the dance. And then, whilst he was still entranced, she came to him and placed his right arm about her waist and took his left hand in hers.

"Now," she said, "follow me, sailor. You step off with the left foot, like this, bring the right foot up so, make a half-turn, thus."

Awkwardly, Mr. Brindle progressed along the deck. Perfume enveloped him. Under the palm of his hand her body moved sweetly to the rhythm of Waldteufel. She laughed.

"I guess," she said, "you're not feeling too happy about it?"

"Happy?" replied Mr. Brindle. He shook his head. "Ah! You don't know. You've no idea. I'm having the time of my life."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Mr. Puckle Philosophizes

I

ALTHOUGH ADA LETTS was engaged, she was not at all satisfied with her fiancé. To begin with she didn't love him, and she was old-fashioned enough to believe that love was paramount where two people engaged themselves to be married. And, as England receded more and more into the past, thus presenting her with a bird's-eye view of Arthur Shedley, she began to see that he was a creature of many imperfections. He was large and bustling, and decorous, and disinclined to enter into what Ada Letts called the minor ecstasies of life. He would not, for instance, indulge in a donkey-ride on the beach, or patronize the coconut-shy at the fair, or eat hot peas in a tent, or do any of the things that stuffy people consider to be not quite the thing. And Ada Letts simply adored all these things. She loved to go to the Derby with a couple of hard-boiled eggs and a lettuce; she loved to mingle with the crowd and get shoved about, have her hand crossed with silver, and wash her meal down sitting on the grass with a glass of tepid beer which she had fought for in a proletarian marquee. She would have hated the politeness of a grand-

stand seat, or an orchestra stall, or a first-class carriage, or dinner at Claridges. The enjoyments of the masses, she would contend, were the only true and natural enjoyments, and after a day's racing during which she had been well and truly shoved about, had her toes trodden on countless times, her hat pushed over her eyes, the breath squeezed out of her body, and her winnings stolen by a welsher, she would flop into a chair with a sigh of sheer happiness and announce that she'd had a perfectly lovely day.

Arthur Shedley, on the other hand, was conventional to a degree. He believed in the correct dress for the correct occasion. For him to be seen in flannel bags, or a cap, or an open-necked shirt, would be unthinkable. He never visited the local (it doesn't do, old man, people talk), or abandoned himself to a picnic, or failed to be shocked when Ada Letts hailed a Stop-Me-And-Buy-One. Most of the time he talked earnestly about Getting On, and Providing for the Future, and the solid contribution of the Middle Class to the Body Politic. Some of the time he listened to Ada Letts talking about how, in the heart of the country, with not a soul to break the solitude, she could hear voices, the whisper of the great Unknown, mysterious sounds that fell on her ears with an almost unbearable happiness; and about the way she had sometimes lain down to kiss the violets, and put her arms about the living trees with the same tenderness which she felt for lambs, and little dogs, and week-old calves. He listened, but he didn't understand, and he would say whenever she came to the end of such a recital:

"I don't know, Ada. You're a funny girl. But there, it takes all sorts to make a world I suppose."

And now, as Ada Letts viewed Arthur Shedley in all his uninspiring parts, she began to be convinced of her mistake. Arthur didn't understand her, he never would understand her. Well, she might have put up with that; in any case she suspected that she wasn't a very understandable creature. But there was also the fact that she could never see him as

a playmate; Arthur would never so far forget his dignity as to take her hand and run with her, laughing, across a field of buttercups for sheer joy, or enter into that spirit of fun which for ever bubbled in her breast.

"No." Ada Letts pronounced the word aloud and firmly shook her head. She perceived that she had been in great danger, had just drawn back from an abyss. Astonishing that she hadn't realized it before. Well, thank goodness that she had come away, after all: it had enabled her to see him clearly, and to see him whole. She hadn't been particularly keen on the trip; she would by far have preferred to make the voyage in a cargo ship; but a friend who had been forced to cancel his passage at the last moment had offered her his ticket at a tempting discount.

However, it had not turned out to be so bad as she had expected; the Weiss family were uncommonly interesting, Lady Eleanor was a dear, Kay French was a kindred spirit, Michael Dunne was much more of a man than Arthur Shedley, and Mr. Wix presided over the saloon with a genial and avuncular charm. As for Mr. Puckle, he listened a lot and was not very talkative, save to herself, and as she thought of him she smiled. He reminded her rather of that finished slickness which was to be met with in the Hollywood gangster; he had the crisp, assured, decisive air of a man who knew what he wanted and made no doubt about getting it. Last, and not unattractive to Ada Letts, he had on occasion a playful and mischievous eye and a capacity for bantering fun which evoked from her a whole-hearted response. She rather liked him. He amused her with his resemblance at times to a raffish bird, and his somewhat heavy-handed attempts at flirtation.

And when, at this juncture, she looked up from the swift sea sliding past the ship's side and saw the object of her thoughts approaching her, she returned his wave with enthusiasm. If Mr. Puckle was not one of the best people, he at least knew where to buy the best clothes. He looked like an American gentleman who had made enough money

to visit Saville Row when he wanted a dozen or so of new suits.

2

"Hello there," he called. He added, reaching her chair: "Say, Miss Letts, that was sure a grand talk we had last night. I gotta hand it to you for teaching me English as she never is spoken. I guess some o' them words you handed out was never heard before; well—huh—outside of Oxford college or some of them swell joints. How're you feeling this morning? Able to sit up and take nourishment?"

Mr. Puckle drew up a chair and sat down. The dark eyes of Ada Letts, meeting his own, twinkled with merri-ness, the fullness of her lips lost no whit of beauty as they curved in a smile. Delight moved in Mr. Puckle's breast, was expressed in laughter.

"You're a deep one," he suggested. "I bet there's more in you than ever came out a finishing school. Isn't that so?"

"I hope so," said Ada Letts. "It's a long time since I left school."

"Do I have to believe that?" demanded Mr. Puckle.

"Why shouldn't you?"

"Right now you look fifteen years old."

"Really? Well, I'd better start calling you pop."

"Cute enough," went on Mr. Puckle, "to kidnap. And I'll bet there's plenty of men would pay a qucen's ransom for you at that."

"Evidently," murmured Ada Letts, "I'm the answer to a Puckle's prayer. I hope I'm not disturbing your peace of mind?"

"Don't take any notice of me, sister," said Mr. Puckle. "Most of the time I just like to hear myself talk. But that doesn't mean I don't know a lady when I see one. And you're a lady. Now that Mrs. Weiss——"

"What's wrong with Mrs. Weiss?"

"What's right with her? She isn't even a woman. She's just a walking gramophone with one record." Mr. Puckle suddenly sat up straight in his chair, thrust out his chest, elevated his nose, and somehow contrived an expression of arrogance moved to emotion. "Say, Ida, what do you know about that? This gentleman's ancestor sat down at table with Henry the Eighth." It was Mrs. Weiss to the life.

"Delicious," said Ada Letts, wiping the tears from her eyes. "That was quite up to professional standards."

"Wind her up and she'll go on for hours," went on Mr. Puckle. "It's bad luck for that kid of hers. She's gotten bad luck twice. Once in her choice of a mother, and twice from the way her face has gone wrong. Gee, look at that water, blue as a flower. And them clouds, white as a milkmaid's apron. Don't it make you feel good?"

"Indeed it does," said Ada Letts, warmly.

"Mind if I smoke a cigar?" he asked. "I guess they're somewhat strong."

"Not in the least. I'll smoke a cigarette to keep you company. Have you travelled much, Mr. Puckle?"

"Sister, I've travelled the world—and then some. I've been on the hop all the days of my life. In and out of trains, and steamships, and aeroplanes. The Bristol in Paris, Shepheards in Cairo, the Plage at Ostend—I've slept in all the goldarned hotels you ever heard of."

"But how lovely!" said Miss Letts. "You're a very lucky man."

"Lucky? I don't know about that. I guess I've been so busy getting to hell out of some place or another that I've never had time to sit down and figure out what it all means. I guess I'd be a whale of a fellow for just sitting about and using my brains if I could only swing a long vacation. High-class thinking, if you know what I mean, sister. The—huh—purpose of life, and the mystery of the universe, and the history of man. What are we here for, anyway? There's more to it than just getting up, and

shaving yourself, and smoking a cigar, and talking a lot of poppycock, and calling it a day."

"Much more," agreed his companion.

"But there you are," went on Mr. Puckle, with a wave of his hand. "You gotta leave it to the big intellectual shots to fix your thinking for you; they got it all down in black and white—Einstein, and Darwin, and—huh—all those guys. Not that you can believe all you read in books. Say, I gotta book right now down in my cabin—*My Life*, it's called, by a Criminal. And is it hooey? I'll tell the world. This book, they say, takes you right inside and shows you the works. The hell it docs! That guy was never no more a crook than kiss my Aunt Fanny. He's just pulling a line of slick syntax to rope the customers in. To read him you'd think the New York Police Department was just a home for boneheads, and grabbing yourself a dishful of cracked ice was no more than a parlour-game."

"Cracked ice?" Ada Letts looked puzzled.

"Diamonds, sister, diamonds. It ain't so easy as all that, not by a jugful. I know. I've been on the inside of the crook racket pretty well all my life. Ever heard of Pinkerton's Detective Agency?"

"Why, yes, I believe I have. Didn't they help to track down the Schikling gang?"

"That's right, sister. And up till a coupla years ago I was their number one Ace."

"Well," said the girl, "that explains it."

"Explains what?"

"Your appearance. You've got a sort of darting-eyed alertness, a look of hard efficiency, an air of being—well—perpetually on your toes."

"Have I, by God!" exclaimed Mr. Puckle. "If I was half as good as I look I'd be running a Packard automobile from an apartment on Fifth Avenue."

"It must," suggested Ada Letts, "have been very exciting for you."

"Don't you believe it, Miss Letts. I guess it was just a job. You did your duty and you drew your pay."

"And now, I suppose you've retired?"

"Retired!" Mr. Puckle gave an ironic laugh. "I guess I'd pass right out if I ever made enough jack to quit working—yes, miss, I guess I'd die of shock. Right now I ought to be getting the old nose down to the grindstone. Didn't you know I was in real estate? No, this is just a rest cure. I was all in. I got so I wanted to scream at the sight of a front elevation. And one morning I packed my grips and lit right out for Europe by Transatlantic airplane. Puckle, I says to myself, you gotta go chase your health and strength. Any more of this and they'll be measuring you for a wooden overcoat."

"You were very wise," she told him. "And it's certainly done you good. You don't look in the least like an invalid."

Up the bridge-ladder and along the deck came Albert Sims. He was carrying a tray with two cocktails thereon.

"It's eleven o'clock," explained Mr. Puckle. "I thought you might like one."

"Why, how nice of you!" smiled Ada Letts.

"Don't mention it, baby," said Mr. Puckle as the steward moved away. "I guess it's nice of you to accept it. Well—*prosit*. Here's to the dame who never refuses, to let him caress her whenever he chooses."

Mr. Puckle winked a saucy eye, and ran a finger down her arm, and Miss Letts, giggling, said: "Customers are requested not to handle the produce. You know, I think you've got the makings of a very naughty man."

3

Miss Letts finished her cocktail, and produced from her bag a fountain-pen and a writing-pad.

"I hope," she said, "you won't think me very rude if I write a letter?"

"Surely not," said Mr. Puckle, cheerfully. "You go
n

ahead, sister. And tell 'em all at home that Wally Puckle sends his kind regards."

She unscrewed the cap of her pen, and faced the ordeal ahead of her squarely. Before she was through she would, she knew, be all feverish; the skin of her body would itch and prickle; erasions would multiply themselves to the exclusion of sense, large blots would deface the text; she would fight on through a welter of ink, staining her fingers, even blacking her nose, her chin. Miss Letts was allergic to letter-writing; with a pen in her hand she became a completely different person, a total loss to reason, possessed by something of the frenzy of Gadarene swine. For a moment or two, unwilling to begin, she dallied with the gulls, wheeling in placid circles about the masthead, with the sea, docile and innocuous in small wavelets of blue and cream, with the sud of clouds fat and dawdling under the flashing sun. And, at last, staring distastefully at the pad on her knee, she wrote: *S.Y. Aphrodite, At Sea.*

Meantime, Mr. Puckle had retired into the fastness of his mind. Mr. Puckle wasn't sure; meditating upon the precarious nature of the sinful life, he experienced for a moment or two a desperate longing for the certitudes of honest labour, his name on a pay-roll, his life a settled dailiness of journeys to and from, say, the Empire State Building, or the Corn Exchange—any of those places where a man could work in peace without the need to be for ever looking over his shoulder. Sitting on the deck of the *Aphrodite*, sunk in thought, he shook his head and rather mournfully contemplated his finger-nails. He said to himself: You're fifty-one. Another ten years and you'll be sitting on a bench with the throw-outs in Gramercy Park, if you ain't sitting behind bars at Sing Sing. For forty years you been dodging the cops, faking your passports, writing stumer cheques, handing out phoney bills, iron money, dud title-deeds, God knows what-all. And will you tell me what you got for it? The guy who said there's no percentage in crime is dead right. You been chasing a

rainbow, Puckle. Right now you're back where you started. Right now you gotta start in and build a career.

"Oh, dear!" sighed Ada Letts.

"What's the matter, baby?" asked Mr. Puckle.

"I've made a blot."

"I guess I've made a few blots in my time," muttered Mr. Puckle. "Gee, I'll say!"

Well, she wrote, here I am, settling down nicely, just letting each day unfold, and enjoying the sheer novelty of life in a luxury yacht. And it really is luxury; carpets like air-cushions, and pink marble bathrooms, and superlatively cushioned ease. I can enjoy it once, but it's not my cup of tea for ever and ever—all rather relaxing and cossety.

And you ain't even sure (Mr. Puckle told himself) that you got solid foundations. You can't, by golly, tell rock from quicksand. Right here in this yacht you got what looks like a cinch, you'd say it was reinforced concrete and steel. But things go wrong. You can never be sure. This guy French is liable to dump the whole bag of tricks in the drink, the way he's all to hell like a rat in a rick-fire. Or that pleasant bastard Wix might turn out to be a Scotland Yard Dick. Or I might pass out with a heart attack in somebody else's cabin and blow the whole racket to kingdom come: angina pectoris the doc said, and at that I wasn't to go exciting myself. Well, I guess there's a fat chance of cutting out the excitement. You've only got to open a door and step out in a corridor with the clocks ticking and somebody snoring and the pilot-light just showing a glim—you've only got to feel the carpet on your stockinged feet and you're all of a muck-sweat.

Just the perfection of loveliness, wrote Ada Letts. The air so clear that it sparkles and dances, the unbelievable blue of sea and sky—it's quite indescribable. And the gulls, the almost iridescent whiteness of the gulls in the sun. Do you remember that enchanting verse: A duck on a pond, a bird on the wing, what a little thing to remember for years, to remember with tears?

"Any more blots, sister?" asked Mr. Puckle.

She lifted a flushed face, blew out a long breath. "Mr. Puckle, it's too terrible. All blots with just a bit of writing in between. And I've got a temperature."

No, Mr. Puckle wasn't sure. But, at this moment he started up in his chair as Kay French settled herself on the opposite side of the deck. On and off, he had considered Kay French as a possible source of income for some time. Here, at least, was the surety of hard cash, and that without too much excitement. He arose, and crossed over to join her.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Blackmail

1

SHE GREETED HIM with a gaiety that struck at his resolve, and Mr. Puckle felt almost ashamed of what he was about to do. But not quite. He had never been ashamed of anything in his life. When Mr. Puckle was working he cast all feeling aside, and became inexorable as the cutting edge of a cold chisel. His own greeting was no less gay; it was debonair, smiling, but a careful observer would have noticed that the smile did not extend to his eyes.

"Well, well, well," he cried. "How's everything? Mind if I sit down?"

"You're welcome. That's what they say in New York, isn't it? I think it's so nice. The way they say it, I mean. As if it comes straight from the heart."

Mr. Puckle sat down. "You've been to New York?"

"And Philadelphia, and Chicago, and Pittsburg, and San Francisco. I went over with Norman Hartley to display some models."

"And what did you think of the United States?"

"I thought they were wonderful. I suppose everybody's said that before. And the New York skyline—well, that could only be described by a Beethoven. They gave me a lovely time. In fact, it was stupefying. I was a rag when they finished saying good-bye on the ship. Just fell into my bunk unconscious."

Mr. Puckle gave her a swift glance. She looked capable, self-assured, what he called hard-boiled, a woman who would keep her end up. He thought: She won't crumple up, buddy. She'll take it on the chin without batting an eye. He said:

"How's the brother?"

"Better this morning. I think he's improving."

"I wouldn't know. Why, by golly, I've only seen him about three times, apart from meals. He ain't what you'd call a mixer, is he?"

"No, he isn't a mixer. He never has been that. But you mustn't think he's disagreeable, Mr. Puckle. It doesn't mean a thing. It's just his way."

"I guess you're fond of him, ain't you?"

Kay French gave Mr. Puckle a level glance. There was an oddness about his tone, about his eyes, which she failed to define. She said:

"Why, yes. Naturally. He's my only brother."

There was a pause. Kay French stooped, picked up a frame of stretched *petit point* embroidery, took the needle in her fingers. Then Mr. Puckle said:

"It's kind of queer, I guess it's . . . mysterious."

"What is?"

"About your brother."

"I shouldn't worry about him, Mr. Puckle. He's quite normal, really. It's just that he prefers to be solitary. Quite a lot of men are like that, I should imagine. And usually they're left to their own devices. It's only when they find themselves in small communities, such as this yacht, that they seem queer."

Mr. Puckle didn't seem satisfied; she wished that he

would talk about something else; she began to contemplate being rude to him as he went on:

"I guess it isn't just that kind of queerness. I've knocked about the world, Miss French, I've been places, I've seen things, and when I see a guy looking like that I say to myself: Gee, there's a story there, that guy's sure got something under his hat."

With the slightest hint of contempt she laughed.

"Perhaps you've got a hypersensitive mind, Mr. Puckle. Don't you think you're rather inclined to exaggerate? My brother's story is frightfully unexciting. He's been a secretary for most of his life. He's lived alone, in diggings. I don't see why I should tell you this, but I give you the information for what it's worth in order to set you at rest."

Mr. Puckle offered her a cigarette, which she declined, and lit one himself. He was undismayed. He persisted. He was leading up to his point. True, he could have got it over some little while back, but that would have been a bit crude, a bit tough on the girl. He had guessed rightly that she didn't know, and he didn't want to give it to her straight between the eyes—lead up to it by easy stages, build up the alarm bit by bit—that was the way.

"No, Miss French," he said. "I can't accept that stuff about a hypersensitive mind and exaggeration. By your leave, I think maybe it's you that's at fault. I guess maybe you're apt to be a bit superficial, you only see what shows on the surface—and at that, by golly, it's plenty. Do you know what struck me about your brother? I've seen guys look like that when they've been on the run."

Kay French abruptly laid down her embroidery. Contempt was open now; it looked coldly out of her fine eyes.

"On the run? You're talking nonsense. I think perhaps you've been reading too much. My brother's case is quite uncomplicated. He's nervous, he's shy, that's all. Don't you think we'd better discuss something else? You, for instance. I feel sure that with your capacity for romancing you must have had an extremely interesting life?"

Mr. Puckle's smile wasn't pleasant; his eyes glittered with an ironic light which all at once chilled her with apprehension. Suddenly moved by an impulse to rise, to make an excuse and leave him, she stooped to pick up her bag. She dropped it again. Something held her back.

"Now don't get all het up, Miss French," said Mr. Puckle. "Your brother's nervous—all right. He's shy—O.K. But don't you go thinking that's all there is to it. You said about complications. Let me tell you that right now he's all complicated to hell—or maybe I mean implicated? You better listen to me. I'm not romancing. This is fact, good and solid, the straight dope from his own lips. And I guess I can convince you with one word. Harriwell."

2

Harriwell. She gave up all attempts at embroidery now. The impact on her consciousness of that name had all the weight of a physical blow. What could this man know about Harriwell, about the relations between Harriwell and Herbert? And now all the little things she had noticed about her brother: the desperation of his nervousness, his extreme unwillingness to co-operate, his haggardness, the hunted look—above all the hunted look—all these matters were gathered up into a whole which suddenly became frightening. And now Mr. Puckle was talking again. She listened with incredulous ears whilst he told of the interview between Herbert French and Mr. Wix, missing out nothing of material importance, for he had a tenacious memory for what was likely to be useful, and a logical relish for marshalling his facts. He talked on, and for Kay French the happiness of sky, and sea, and dreaming white birds with the sun on their backs was blotted out. The day became a threat, the *Aphrodite* a trap, her whole body an aching vessel of regret that she had ever persuaded her brother to undertake this voyage. And

behind it all there throbbed a loathing of the man by her side. At last he came to an end. She was not such a fool that she didn't divine what he was after. She said:

"You had better tell me what you want. You may be under a misapprehension. Did you think that I was rich? I work for my living."

"Sure," agreed Mr. Puckle, pleasantly. "So do I."

"So," she said, bitterly, "do the rats."

"That won't get you anywhere. Miss French. I guess a guy's got to do the job he's fitted for. When I was a kid I was batty on being a surgeon, but the dice just didn't roll my way. And now—well, this is a surgical job, you might say, without anæsthetic, and that way the patient's bound to kick and holler. It's tough for you, and it ain't pleasant for me. It ain't pleasant even when I draw the dough, because sooner or later the dough gets used up, and you gotta start all over again. And don't you kid yourself that it's easy money, either, or that I went into this racket because of the danger. I guess them guys that ain't never happy unless they're beating it in somebody else's automobile with a police-car on their tail, or listening to a burglar-alarm when silence is golden, or beating the cop's night-stick with a right to the jaw—I guess that sort of bird never existed outside of the story-books. I got into this racket, believe you me, for the same reason that Rockefeller got into oil—because that was the job he was headed for right from the cradle."

"What makes you think," she asked him, coldly, "that I'm interested in your excuses? I can't tell you what I think of you. Nothing can excuse such—such beastliness. My brother is sick. Not sick in the way that you understand sickness, I dare say. And you use this as a——"

"No, sister. I don't use any guy who's sick. I don't even use you, come to that. What I'm after using, on this occasion, is your boy-friend."

"My boy-friend?"

"Mr. Wix."

"You think I would ask him? Never! Why, he isn't even——"

"Listen to me, sister. I been watching that guy ever since we got under way. He fell for you from the word go. If you was to ask him for the moon right now I guess he'd give you the next best thing. Don't tell me that he couldn't afford it, either. The first night he ever came aboard this ship he was throwing five-pound notes about as if they was wrapping paper. Bundles of fivers from every goddam pocket, and him losing the run of 'em like a man with no hands. And he was tight. Full right up, with his back teeth awash. Another drink, and he'd have been running over. And a guy who treats good money as if it was dirt don't deserve to have any. Where'd he get it from, anyway? Did he ever have to work for it, with them white hands of his? And what's going to happen to it? One of these nights he'll be getting a skinful of whisky and tearing all those fivers into little bits just for the hell of it. Or chucking it away in the streets because it's cluttering up his pockets. And before anything like that happens I could use some of it myself."

"Mr. Puckle," said Kay French, "I find you unpleasant company. Will you tell me exactly what sum you have in mind?"

"Sure. Five hundred pounds is the figure, and that's rock bottom. I guess that maybe sounds a lot to you. It isn't. Wix would give twice as much for one of them lovely curls of yours."

"Five hundred pounds! " The girl shook her head. "It's quite impossible."

"What's impossible about it? I don't get you."

"That I should ask him. What makes you think that I've got any claim on his generosity? You had better ask him yourself. Why didn't you in the first place?"

"He's a big man," said Mr. Puckle, "and I guess he'd be a tough handful. I only saw a pair of shoulders like his once before, and they was Jack Dempsey's. I don't aim to

get my clock pushed in, sister. You gotta tell him what I've said."

"And if I don't?"

"Well, you don't have to ask me that. I guess I'd spill the beans, I guess I'd have no option. We all gotta make a living. Business is business. You wouldn't feel too fussy with yourself if all these people knew your brother was a crook? I'll bet he'd hate it like hell, too. In fact, I shouldn't be surprised, Miss French, if that wasn't the last straw for your brother."

For a moment pain looked out of her ashen face as the implication of this went home. But she had courage, and it blazed in her scornful eyes as she faced the creature by her side.

"You may go ahead," she said, calling upon all her resources of bluff. She was gambling; indeed, it seemed to her as if she gambled with her brother's life, for the workings of his tortured mind were unpredictable. "Do your dirty work. If my brother has done what you say, then he must put up with the consequences. Go and tell Miss Letts. Complain to Mr. Dunne that we've got a thief on board. Call in the police at Malta. Cable Mrs. Harriwell. And now will you please go? You make me feel ill."

If Kay French looked striking in repose, in indignation she looked magnificent. For a moment or two Mr. Puckle was struck dumb as the elemental woman came to the surface in a fierce tumult of heaving breasts and blazing eyes. And then, as they turned from his face with disgust, he followed the direction of her glance.

Along the deck, wagging his right hand playfully in the air, smiling with pleasure, came Mr. Wix. Within two paces he halted. The change in his face as he looked from one to the other was fascinating.

"Hullo?" he said. And, turning from the pallor of Kay French to the uneasiness of Mr. Puckle, he snapped: "What's been going on?"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Two Brandies

MR. PUCKLE HASTILY AROSE. He didn't like the look of Mr. Wix; Mr. Wix had all at once turned from a happy-go-lucky schoolboy into tight-lipped sternness. Wary-eyed, Mr. Puckle moved away a pace or two.

"I was just going, Mr. Wix," he said. "Have my chair. Gotta letter to write." He moved off, achieved a smile, a jaunty wave of the hand. "I'll be seeing you."

Mr. Wix followed him out of sight, taut with suspicion. There had been something scuttling and crab-like about Mr. Puckle's departure; a sideways wariness as if he were withdrawing judiciously from a tiger. He turned to Kay French, and grimness redoubled itself on his features. She was pale. She looked crushed, very near to tears. He sat down. He said:

"What's the matter? What's he been saying to you?"

At this juncture Mr. Wix suddenly put his fingers in his mouth and blew a piercing whistle. He had seen the steward approaching the wheelhouse.

"Two brandies," he said when Albert Sims arrived, "and a baby Polly."

He gave her a cigarette, lit one himself.

"Now, my dear. Tell me."

She gave him a quivering smile. Her eyes distressed him so much that he looked away.

"Oh, Wixy," she said, "I'm so miserable. Everything's gone wrong. Why didn't you tell me about Herbert?"

"About Herbert?" Mr. Wix looked blank.

"About the pictures. He knows."

"Who knows?"

"That man Puckle. He heard you talking on deck the other night. Everything."

Mr. Wix drew a deep breath. He was staggered; it was

beyond reason that anyone should have heard.

"So that's it," he muttered. Recalling the scene, he felt stupefied. The ship throwing herself about, a gale roaring, spray coming over, the deck deserted. Where could Puckle have been? He breathed heavily as rage mounted in him.

She reiterated: "Why didn't you tell me, Wixy? I think you might have taken me into your confidence."

"You were worried enough already about him," said Mr. Wix. "I didn't want to add to it. And I didn't see the necessity. I suppose Puckle told you that we'd arranged to get the pictures sent back from Port Said?"

"No, he didn't say that."

"I know the head of British Overseas Airways there. The things will be posted from London. Nobody would have been any the wiser if this swine——"

Mr. Wix paused. "What does he want?"

Albert Sims arrived with the brandies. "I took the liberty," he said, "of bringing some dry biscuits, sir."

"Thank you, steward. Will you leave the tray?"

It occurred to him that Mr. Puckle would want money, and his rage flared up anew as he realized what the girl must have gone through. A little squirt like that putting on the screw, trading on sisterly affection—the sheer devilishness of the situation almost drove him frantic. He felt murderous, he would continue to feel murderous every time he set eyes on the self-assured complacency of that hooked nose, and he wouldn't be able to do a thing about it. Impossible that he should begin to manhandle Puckle amid the polite surroundings of this yacht—it just wasn't done. Impossible also that what had passed should be disclosed to Herbert French for his decision. Such men, thought Mr. Wix, don't make decisions; they just crumple up and become a grave liability to their relatives. No, they would just have to sit tight and suffer the company of the egregious Puckle with good grace—a prospect which was anything but pleasant.

"Wixy," said the girl suddenly, "I've got an idea. Herbert and I can disembark at Malta and go home."

He started at this. "Good God, my dear—you can't do that. It will spoil everything. There's nothing in this situation that can't be managed. You've had a shock. That swine's been blackmailing you, of course."

Anxiously Mr. Wix looked at her. On a sudden impulse he put out his hand, lightly squeezed her knee.

"Don't, for God's sake, go home. I shall be lost without you."

"But I must, Wixy, I must. I won't have you dragged into——"

"That's unkind," put in Mr. Wix. "You're not dragging me into anything. Now, come. What's the damage likely to be? Don't be afraid. I'm not without a pound or two. And I'll be honoured, I'll be delighted."

The brown eyes looked into hers, pleading, eager, smiling. Mr. Wix looked so much like a faithful spaniel that she suddenly smarted with tears.

"I think," she said, "it's heavenly of you. I'll never forget it. But, of course, I wouldn't dream, it would be an imposition, I've got absolutely no right, no claim on you."

"My dear," muttered Mr. Wix, sorrowfully, "you shouldn't say that. You've got every claim. I—I wish you'd regard me as yours to command. In every way. I—damn it, Kay, I'm very fond of you, and it's all bloody nonsense for you to say that——"

Abruptly Mr. Wix pulled himself up.

"Language, language," he murmured. "Sorry, old girl."

She smiled, and because she was moved, the smile was like a revelation of tenderness, and a sudden thought of all the hours he had swigged away came into the mind of Mr. Wix like a pain. He wanted to say to her: "You're lovelier at this moment than you've ever been," but no, he wouldn't, she was overwrought, it wouldn't be fair.

"I can't ever thank you, Wixy," she said. "You're so good, such a comfort."

"I hope, sincerely, that I shall never be anything else."

"I'm afraid," she went on, "I haven't got much wisdom, I'm not very sagacious. I ought to have seen that it was highly unsuitable to bring Herbert along."

"He's your brother," pointed out Mr. Wix. "You can't apply the foot-rule of reason to brothers—that is, when you're fond of them."

"No, that's just the trouble. I've always used my heart for Herbert rather than my head. I think perhaps it would have been better if I'd been firm with him. And I certainly shouldn't have pushed things to this length. It makes matters very unpleasant all round."

"You haven't yet told me," he reminded her, "what figure that rascal had in mind."

"It doesn't matter. I sent him about his business. I told him to do his worst. I was bluffing, of course. And I'm terribly frightened. Do you think——"

"You shouldn't have done that," interrupted Mr. Wix.

"But it wasn't a pound or two. It was five hundred. And to me, that's a lot of money. I couldn't——"

"My dear girl, if you knew how many five hundreds I've wasted you'd be shocked. Now look here—let me go and settle with this merchant. Don't think that it will be any inconvenience to me. I'm a rich man—or at least, I have expectations."

"No. Blackmail—it's loathsome, it's beastly. I'd hate him to get away with it so easily."

"But you bluffed him. You're frightened, you're sick with fright, worried to death."

"I'm frightened and I'm worried," she admitted. "But I won't give in, Wixy. And I won't have you giving in for me. You promise?"

"All right. I promise. And I don't think you need be frightened. Blackmailers haven't got much guts. I don't think he'll take any action." Wix looked suddenly grim

again. "I'll discuss the matter with him. You leave it to me."

After a long pause she sighed. "I've known a lot of men, Wixy," she said. "I've known heaps of men."

"They must," he suggested, "be all the better for it."

"But," she added, "I've never known one like you."

"Funny, that. Just what my poor old governor said to me. 'By God, John,' he said, 'I've never known your match. You're incorrigible. You'll come to a bad end.' Well, it's up to you, my dear."

"What is?"

"To see," said Mr. Wix, "that I don't."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Terror for Mr. Puckle

1

AFT UNDER THE AWNING the guests lay supine. For'ard, where there was no awning, the caulking bubbled out of the seams of the planks under the brassy glare of the sun. Down in the engine-room the greasers worked stripped to the waist. Mr. McCann, the chief engineer, breathed in the hot oily vapours, and drank prodigious quantities of tepid tea, and swore with increasing irritation every time he looked at the thermometer. Sweat poured out of him, out of everybody; they worked in a Turkish bath of steam and haze in which the turbine casings were fast becoming red hot—or so Mr. McCann said. Every now and then he walked aft to look at the main bearings as if he expected them to burst into flames. "A hunderd degrees fahrenheit," he muttered, wiping the sweat out of his eyes. "What's yon bluidy Captain thinking about?"

Angrily, he blew down the voice-pipe to the bridge, took out the plug.

"Is that the Captain? Oh, it is. Aweel, are ye aware that there's an ingine-room in this ship?"

"Why, what's the matter with it?" came back the voice of Captain Sale.

"I thought I'd take the liberty of bringing it to ye're notice," returned McCann, tartly. "I thought I'd remind ye that we're sustainin' the heartbeats o' the steam yacht *Aphrodite* down here, and that withoot them ye'd only have a derelict to command."

"Come off it, Mac. What's on your mind?"

"This bluidy heat, that's what's on my mind. It's like breathing hell-fire. A hunderd degrees fahrenheit, and still rising."

"Hum," said Captain Sale. "It sounds like a warm day down there. All right, Mac. Keep your hair on. I'll have a couple of windsails rigged."

Soon the windsails—long canvas funnels about two feet in diameter—were hoisted to the mast and let down through the engine-room skylights. Save that which was self-made by the ship's passage through the water, there was no breeze. The temperature in the engine-room showed no disposition to fall, but McCann, standing splay-legged on the control platform, holding the end of the windsail to his bare chest, achieved coolness by faith. However, one of the greasers presently slumped down in a faint, and news of this being communicated to the bridge, Captain Sale rang down Stop Engines, and approached Dunne on the bridge-deck.

"Beg pardon, sir," he said, "but I've stopped her for a little while. I thought you might like to bathe over the side."

"That's a notion," agreed Dunne. "Splendid. You'd better let the crew go over too."

The guests were immediately animated. Ida Weiss almost leaped from her chair, executed two swift turns of a waltz.

"A bathe," she said. "I guess there never was a better day for it. You must have been inspired, Captain. I didn't

know you could stop ships for bathing."

"You can't," said Lady Eleanor. "Not ordinary ships—freighters, I mean. Isn't that so, Captain? But they do it in the Navy a lot, I know."

Ida Weiss was already disappearing down the ladder. Lady Eleanor followed. Mrs. Weiss, who had been telling Dunne how her ancestors emigrated from Holland to America in the fifteen hundreds ("we had a great deal to do with bringing—huh—Dutch culture to the Middle West, Mr. Dunne") relinquished him with reluctance as he excused himself and crossed over to the engine-room staff who had come up for air.

"You fellows could do with a long cool drink, couldn't you? I'll have something sent up."

Mr. Wix, approaching Herbert French, gently took the book from his hands and dropped it into an empty deck-chair.

"You do swim, old boy? You've got a costume?"

Herbert French was looking better. Back at Number Eight he had largely catered for himself; a niggling frugality combined with an ascetic turn of mind had forbidden the use of what he considered to be too much food; he had, indeed, grudged himself a square meal, he didn't eat enough, according to his landlady, to keep a canary chirruping, relying as he did on gristly knuckles of ham, pots of meat paste, broken biscuits, scraps of bacon retailed at fivepence a pound, bottles of chocolate-coloured rubbish which purported to be coffee, packets of highly perfumed chemicals called *Five-minute Flans*, *O-So-Easy Puddings*, and *In-a-Jiff Jellies*.

In the midst of plenty he had starved himself; malnutrition had depressed him, had aggravated his natural melancholy. But now, under the influence of the sea air and first-class food, he had filled out, his eyes were brighter and much less inclined to be mournful, and the business of making human contacts was daily becoming less difficult. And, though he still carried worry at the back of his mind,

he was less and less disposed to turn it about and examine it. Once that worry had entirely disappeared, Kay French and Mr. Wix both believed that Herbert French would improve; that he might even become normal and liveable. Meantime Mr. Wix had gained his confidence; Mr. Wix was in any case a man who inspired trust and commanded faith. There was much more to his solidity than fifteen stones of flesh; it had the mystical compulsion of ancient institutions and treasured monuments. It is not too much to say that Herbert French would at this juncture have followed Mr. Wix blindly on a forlorn crusade.

He didn't much want to swim. He said: "No, no. I didn't bring one. I didn't expect——"

"But you do swim?"

"Oh, yes, I swim. I—er—just a little, you know. But I'm not keen. Don't bother about me."

"No bother at all, my dear chap. Fix you up in no time. And you must go in. A day like this—wonderful. It'll tone up the liver, make you feel frisky as a young pup. Now you go down to your cabin and strip. I'll bring you a costume in two ticks."

It was Mr. Brindle who provided the costume. As he went along the corridor at the bottom of the companion staircase a door opened to let out Kay French, and his heart skipped with such a movement of pleasure that it almost took his breath away. The perfection of her young body, hitherto only dimly divined, was now revealed in all its glory. Her eyes danced with joy, her flawless skin blazed, it seemed to Mr. Wix, like snow fired by the morning sun, and her yellow silk swim-suit enclosed the sweetness of her waist like a sheath enclosing a tulip-bud. Her face lit up as she saw him, and Mr. Wix, much affected, thought of naiads, and peris, of adventures strange, and beautiful and vague, of which he could never be a part. Gaily, she laughed.

"Isn't it lovely?" she asked. "Wixy—I *am* enjoying myself." And then, quickly: "Is Herbert going in?"

"I'm just taking him a costume," he said.

"I'm so glad. It will do him good. Bless you."

2

Dunne wasn't going in. Surprisingly, he couldn't swim.

"I'm an utter fool in the water," he told Mrs. Weiss.

"It sounds incredible, but I never could get the hang of it. Also I get severe cramps. I've only got to be in the water five minutes, and my legs go dead on me."

"Fancy that now," said Mrs. Weiss. "I wouldn't have believed it. You look so athletic. I can swim. I guess I'd enjoy a swim right now. But I guess my figure wouldn't stand up to criticism. Now Ida—here she is. I always did say she'd got a wonderful figure. You couldn't fault it—don't you agree, Mr. Dunne? Did I tell you that Ida won the golden Venus at the Los Angeles convention? Five hundred and sixty-three candidates, there were."

Having taken a good look at Ida, Dunne was not surprised, and he said as much.

"I've got all her measurements somewhere," went on Mrs. Weiss. "Her photograph was syndicated in over four hundred newspapers. The judge was sure enthusiastic about Ida. He said in the presence of such—huh—an example of our Maker's handiwork, he could only bow his head in—huh—reverence and thanksgiving. He said to take great care of it, that it was the female form truly divine, the most beautiful body in all America, and that probably right now it was a world-beater. And did I cry? I guess I felt like my heart was just bursting with pride and joy, Mr. Dunne."

At this juncture the female form truly divine disappeared in a header over the side. Sounds of splashing, of laughter and joyous cries floated up from the water. Dunne said:

"I think I'll go and watch."

The horizon was lost in a haze of heat, the sun beat down in waves upon the blue water, still as a millpond, and the

blue of the sea was enlivened by bathing-caps and swim-suits of cardinal red, of jade-green, of orange and yellow. Mr. Wix, unexpectedly expert in the water, rolled over and over like a porpoise, was suddenly lost to view and remained lost for such a long time that faces were grave with alarm, then slowly presented himself feet first so that they stared in horror.

"You're a naughty man," reproved Kay French when at last, all chuckling with mischief, his smiling face broke surface. "For heaven's sake, don't give us any more shocks like that."

"Yes," said Mrs. Weiss, at Dunne's elbow, "I guess the judge was sure bowled over. And when he presented Ida with the gold Venus, he knelt, and kissed her hand. I'll say that was a touching gesture. And did it get the crowd? Can you imagine twenty thousand citizens of the United States just stirred to the—huh—depth of their souls? They just let out and gave cheer after cheer. That was a wonderful moment for a mother, Mr. Dunne—the heart, as they say, too full for words."

"It must have been," agreed Dunne. He looked at Mrs. Weiss, an enormous area of white linen, of dimples, of plenteous fat, of angry red chins and a profusion of jingling chains and bracelets. Could he reconcile a heart too full for words and a mother's wonderful moment with this exuberance of flesh and arrogance of mien? Could he see her overcome and weeping? No. She was, he told himself, a snob and a hypocrite; she was a woman dominated by a fixed idea which had taken such full possession of her that there was no room left for affection, for kindness, for decency and sense.

"And, of course," went on Mrs. Weiss, amidst the splashing and the laughter, "there's Ida's side to it. I guess you've got to hand it to her for the way she took it. To be selected out of all the United States for the golden Venus de Milo—well, say, that was honour and glory, and many a girl might have lost her head. But not

Ida. Everybody who met her at the convention was touched by her—huh—simple modesty. She's got the sweetest disposition, Mr. Dunne, sort of quiet, and placid, and really, you wouldn't know she was around the house sometimes. But mind you, she's not cold. Still waters, you know, Mr. Dunne. Deep down in her being there's a core of—huh—passion. Hidden, maybe, but it's there, smouldering, only needing a spark to awaken it. Oh, yes, Mr. Dunne, Ida's capable of a very great love."

Dunne fished in his mind for an answer to this, and was not surprised that he found no suitable comment. In the hope of heading the lady off on to another tack, he said: "She's certainly a wonderful swimmer."

But Mrs. Weiss was not to be deprived of her theme. She said:

"Yes, she sure would make a splendid wife for some—huh—gentleman. She's a very loyal soul, Mr. Dunne. Yes, I'll tell the world that Ida's the heart and soul of loyalty. And she's *urrry* wealthy, right now she's gotten nine hundred thousand dollars all tied up in first-class securities, and when her Uncle Van Huysman dies she comes into another million."

"Lucky girl," was Dunne's remark.

"Yes, I always tell her she's lucky. And I guess it would just break my heart if Ida were to get entangled with one of these—huh—Broadway playboys. What I want for her, Mr. Dunne, is marriage into one of your ancient British families with roots away back in antiquity and the venerable traditions of—huh—race."

"That'll certainly be very nice for the British," Dunne told her. "I hope, for your sake, that Ida will fall in with the notion."

Mrs. Weiss gave him a sharp glance of appraisal. He had the clean-cut look of caste, the authentic aura of the aristocrat which was not to be found anywhere, she thought, except in Carlton House Terrace or English country houses. The mere idea of Dunne as a husband for Ida filled her

with an emotion akin to the cupidity of the miser. Was this the time to make the issue a more personal one? She was about to put it to the test when he suddenly excused himself.

"You don't mind, do you, Mrs. Weiss? I've got one or two matters to attend to below."

3

Mr. Puckle, entering the water from the platform of the accommodation ladder, headed away from the ship until the sounds of jollity became but a faint rumour. He lay on his back, and closed his eyes against the glare of the sun, and vague pictures arose in his head, the dim memories of thirty or forty years ago: Palm Beach, a bucket and spade, a wide parasol, his father teaching him the breast-stroke—split-second snapshots faded by time that came and vanished away in a flash like the shifting mosaic of a kaleidoscope.

Mr. Puckle thrust them aside impatiently. For better or worse the past was gone; he was concerned only with the present, and the present was sharp with the prick of failure. He had made a bad bloomer with Kay French; that she would dig her heels in and stand pat—this was the last thing he had allowed for. And now the cat was out of the bag, he had showed his hand to no purpose, and his prospects of getting away with anything in the nature of hard cash could scarcely be more endangered. Mr. Puckle, floating on his back under the Mediterranean sun, spoke his feelings aloud.

"Oh, the hell with it!" he said. "You're no better than a cack-handed botcher. You've spilled the whole bag of beans right into their lap. That goddamned Wix'll be watching you like a cop with four eyes. Maybe this'll teach you not to go shootin' off your trap."

So absorbed had Mr. Puckle been with his own difficulties that his heart gave a wild leap of alarm when a voice hailed him. In an instant he was treading water. It was Mr. Wix.

He was smiling. In conjunction with that smile Mr. Puckle noticed their distance from the ship. It was, perhaps, a quarter of a mile, but to him it seemed immense, and all at once his mouth was dry with fear.

"Hullo," said Mr. Wix. "Long way from home, aren't you?"

"Yes, I guess so," said Mr. Puckle, forcing a smile. "Guess I like to loosen up and swim a bit when I go in the water."

Swivelling a nervous eye, Mr. Puckle trod water. The shoulders and arms of his companion fascinated him. As for the look of gentle good nature which usually marked the face of Mr. Wix—that had gone, and in its place there was a subtle quality of menace which half closed the brown eyes and made of the fixed smile something that was frightening.

"So do I," agreed Mr. Wix. "Well, it's a lovely day. The water's just right. And here we are—all alone."

There was something dreadful about the significance given to the last two words by Mr. Wix. And it occurred to Mr. Puckle that he was losing his touch. It was so long ago since he had made a mistake that he couldn't remember the occasion. And now he had made two in a row. To have come out here on his own was the biggest mistake he had ever been guilty of. Right now he was ready for the nut-house; there were better guys than him being taken care of by the thousand in places where mistakes couldn't make any difference to them one way or another. For a moment Mr. Puckle envied with all his heart the inmates of lunatic asylums; he desired ardently to be elsewhere at this moment, and the nature of his emotions was not lost on Mr. Wix: the face of Mr. Puckle no longer wore the confidence of a man who is laying down the law to his victim; the contrast between the present situation and that of yesterday, when he sat in a deck-chair setting forth the substance of his ultimatum to Kay French could hardly have been more marked. The situation of yesterday had

been bright with promise. And now, less than twenty-four hours later, he was wondering whether he could even promise himself another hour of life.

It had come to that. Starkly persisting amongst the flood of irrelevancies which cluttered up his mind was the fear of death and the need to escape. He felt pretty certain that he had the speed to beat his opponent once he could get past him. He was scared stiff, so scared that it showed in his face drained of blood, in his eyes blazing with eagerness as they darted furtively from time to time in the direction of the yacht and safety. Mr. Wix looked ready for anything; the very absence of ferocity from his eyes, from his manner, from his conversation, filled the mind of Mr. Puckle with misgiving as much as if he had to deal with a madman. Almost cheerfully, Mr. Wix said further:

"You're not looking yourself to-day."

Mr. Puckle couldn't go on saying nothing. The only thing he could do was to talk, to hope that talk would delay things long enough for him to make his get-away, to hope that some method of making his get-away would be revealed to him. At present, Mr. Wix was watching him very carefully, and that from a position between him and the ship.

"No," he replied, "I'm a bit off colour. I guess it's my liver."

All at once a sense of utter loneliness descended upon Mr. Puckle, and it was increased rather than eased by the faint cries reaching his ears from the yacht, and by the fact that others were enjoying themselves whilst he was suffering the last pitch of terror. He knew the possibilities inherent in this day of sunshine. It was as simple as sewing on a button for Wix to swim back with a corpse in tow. What he had to say about it didn't matter a damn. What he said would go. What he said would be evidence, and all the evidence at that. Death by drowning, sympathy of the passengers extended to the relatives, if any. This white-haired bastard was going to spend one of those fivers

of his on flowers to celebrate the decease of Walter C. Puckle, passed from this life aged fifty-one. R.I.P.

"Yes, your liver," agreed Mr. Wix. "Or do people have a hob-nailed conscience?"

Mr. Puckle couldn't stand it any longer. Mr. Wix was playing with him, and the sensation of being played with was not pleasant. He said:

"I guess I know what you came out here for, Mr. Wix."

"I came out here," said Mr. Wix, "to tell you what a great English judge said about blackmail. It was this: that a murderer may be likeable, but a blackmailer can never be anything but loathsome. That a murderer often deserves mercy, but a blackmailer can never deserve anything but death."

Mr. Puckle made no comment on this.

"My opinion," went on Mr. Wix, "for what it's worth, is that you deserve worse than death. Your attempt to use a woman's affection for her brother as a lever gives the whole thing a peculiar nastiness. Very unkind of you, old boy. Of course, you have to live, as you so obligingly explained to Miss French. Tell me, old boy, do you like your work? Or should I call it a profession?"

"I guess I gotta take the rap," said Mr. Puckle, through white lips. "I didn't aim to go out this way, not with my health and strength. I guess nobody aims to die in the middle of some goddamned ocean thousands of miles away from his home town."

The terror that had been creeping in him suddenly blazed in his eyes, sounded in the shrillness of his raised voice.

"Get it over, will you? Get it over with." Suddenly, he raised an animal scream. "Help! Help!"

Mr. Wix shook his head. "Nobody will hear you, old boy. They're all too busy, they're all making their own particular noise."

The white head suddenly moved a couple of feet nearer to Mr. Puckle as its owner struck out. Before Mr. Puckle

could take avoiding action, a strong arm shot out and he found himself gripped by the hair.

"About blackmail," he said. "I'm in complete agreement with the judge. The blackmailer can never deserve anything but death. Naturally, you have no idea what death by drowning is like. To-day, old boy, you're going to get at least an inkling."

4

"Now," said Albert Sims, "listen to me, o' man. If you think stewarding just means knowing how to lay a table and serve a dinner and make a bed and shake a cocktail you got another think coming. You got to know a bit about everything. You got to know how to carve, you got to know presentation—and that means how to present the food when it's cooked so's to make it look appetizing, see? You got to know about wines, you got to know that a Richebourg and a Romanée is burgundy, and a Château-Laffitte is a claret, and a Vino de Pasto is a sherry. And always remember that claret should be served *chambre*—that's at the temperature of the room where it's going to be drunk, see? Hello?"

Albert Sims stopped as the engine-room telegraph clanged. As the hum of the turbines abruptly ceased he scrambled on to the leaden draining-board of the sink and put his head through the porthole.

"We're stopped," he said. "Wonder what that's for?"

In another two or three moments he knew. In another ten minutes the cabin-flat was deserted and silent, and from over the side came sounds of merriment. All at once, tense with purpose, he gripped his assistant by the arm.

"Listen," he said. "I'm going to leave the pantry door open, and you're going to keep your ears cocked, see? If you hear anybody comin' down the companion staircase, sing out to me—I'll be in number six. Got that?"

With one furtive glance along the length of the corridor the steward dived into number six. He would never make

a criminal; he wasn't fitted for this kind of devious excursion, and every nerve in his body jumped with apprehension as he plunged a trembling hand into the trousers-pocket of Herbert French. The jingle of keys rewarded him. All fingers and thumbs, he began to fit them into the lock of the suitcase. But he found nothing resembling a parcel six inches by four, for the very good reason that Mr. Wix had caused it to be locked away in Dunne's safe. Bitterly disappointed, he closed the pantry door behind him and slumped into his chair. From Jim Barwood, with his eye on gold braid and purser's cap, came an almost soundless whisper.

"Vino de Pasto is a sherry. . . . Vino de Pasto is a sherry." Then, aloud, with a sudden look at his chief: "What was that you said about shombray, steward? The temperature——"

A cobra about to strike could not have looked more venomous than the steward.

"Shombray," he hissed. "I'll shombray you in a minute, you —— great lump. Get to hell out o' this. I want to think, I want five minutes to meself. Go on then. Quick's the word! "

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Survivor

I

NO POWER ON EARTH could save him from what was coming —this, for Mr. Puckle, was the one certitude. The grip of the hand upon his hair communicated a daunting sense of his own puniness as opposed to the vast strength of Mr. Wix. The water, which was quite warm, suddenly chilled him, and his skin shrank from it. With all his senses sharpened by terror, he could hear the faint cries from the yacht much more plainly than before, and the

contrast between this carefree laughter and his own despair gave him a sharp pang. And all at once he was reminded. Angina pectoris. Moved by a faint flicker of hope he said:

"Listen. You gotta listen. I've got a groggy heart—angina. The doctor said——"

The rest of the sentence ended in a gurgling cry. Sun and sky were blotted out by a sinister green twilight, the happy cries gave place to the peculiar sound of water pressing against his eardrums. There flashed across his mind the red flame of panic; he was no longer a man, but a trapped animal fighting for its life, kicking out madly, tearing at Mr. Wix's arm with his nails. Mr. Wix gave him a last shove. Down, down, down he went, clawing at the water, thrusting against it with his feet until, when he had held his breath to what he thought was the last second of endurance, his tormentor let go. But only for a second. Even as he reached the surface and sought to draw breath Mr. Wix dived, seized his ankles, and pulled him under again.

Mr. Puckle didn't see one of those flashlight panoramas of his past life which are supposed to visit drowning men; his mind simply went blank and far away; consciousness receded to a point at which he was aware only of darkness, choked lungs, and the desire to sleep. Later, he realized that he was coughing up water under a brilliant sun which seemed to be spinning drunkenly in the bowl of the sky.

And he was all in, utterly exhausted, without the strength to keep himself afloat. Mr. Wix was holding him up, and suddenly, as the yacht began to blow short blasts on her whistle, it came to him that he was a passenger aboard the *Aphrodite* bound for Port Said and points East.

"I'm beat," he said, weakly. "I'm all washed up. You nearly did me in."

"Within an inch," said Mr. Wix. It occurred to him that he had achieved this more by luck than good judgment, and he stared soberly at the face of Mr. Puckle, white to the lips, and looking queerly shrunken.

"They're whistling for us," he added. "Lay on your back."

He took Mr. Puckle lightly by the underarms, kicked out. He said:

"I'd pack it in if I were you, old boy. Eavesdropping, and blackmailing—all very unpleasant. Why not try and earn an honest living?"

Mr. Puckle's reply to this was a faint smile. He was too tired to talk about unprofitable things. Mr. Wix, occasionally turning his head to check his direction, swam on.

"About that parcel," said Mr. Wix. "It occurs to me that you might be worrying about it. I wouldn't lose any sleep if I were you. It's safe under lock and key."

But Mr. Puckle's memory, for no reason at all, had harked back thirty years, and he was standing with Bridget O'Gorman in the minister's parlour. He remembered very clearly how Bridget had been dressed in a froth of white, and how, when he had placed the ring on her finger, she had kissed him with all the fervour of sweet eighteen; how, in the honeymoon train, she had snuggled up to him like a kitten purring with happiness when he had given her two hundred dollars to put in her bag. "God help us!" she had said, "I've niver had the handlin' of so much money in me loife. You're a darlin' man, Wally, you're the grand and gin'rous man." Eyes like moonstones, auburn hair that grew strong and thick in vigorous tight curls, a rich, deep gurgle of a laugh which lit up her face like sunshine, and a walk that made you think of bands and banners. The memories flooded in. Days at Coney Island, nights on Broadway, the weeks lengthening into months and she wondering what sort of trade it was that allowed for laying abed half the day, and cigars at twenty-five cents a go, and so many fine clothes for herself that she just didn't know where to begin on them.

"Wally, will ye tell me now. Phwat like of a job is ut that gives ye a gintleman's life and a mint of money to throw about?"

And the night when she knew; the night when he got stupid drunk and turned out of his pockets the Van Hoyt diamonds. Mr. Puckle could see them now winking and flashing on the table between them; he could see Bridget's blank look turn to fright, suspicion; suspicion to inexorable purpose when the papers broke the story next morning and she addressed the sealed package to Mrs. Van Hoyt. That moment had always recurred to him as the worst in his life, tormenting him with visions of bliss thrown away, the climax to his career deliberately sabotaged, a hundred thousand dollars' worth of diamonds handed back to a woman whose husband was a millionaire ten times over.

And, thereafter, Bridget growing in grimness. Mr. Puckle had loved Bridget in his own peculiar way, and he watched for the light to return to her face in vain. For a while she worked on him; she would not lightly give up the struggle to mend his ways; but Mr. Puckle, steeped in sin, sodden with wrong-doing, refused to be cleansed. So Bridget, no longer willing to live on the proceeds of theft, engaged herself to work in a laundry for twenty dollars a week, and it was as if those moonstone eyes of hers had never known a twinkle, or her lips a smile. Mr. Puckle began to be much away from home, and when he returned to it he was frequently drunk. And Bridget, loving him, withheld her body to her own torment, and waxed grim in misery through staring into a future without hope. Occasionally she lost her temper and dealt justly with Mr. Puckle; she had always been notably strong, and at these times she was magnificent in her strength as she tried to lambast the devil out of him.

"Anny other woman," she told him, "would leave ye. But I've made me holy vows for betther or worse, and ut's the way I'll be cookin' for ye and darnin' yer socks and makin' yer bed until the divil dhrives ye into prison and brings disgrace on me name."

Yes, Mr. Puckle remembered. And now, lying on his back in the midst of a foreign sea thirty years later he

compared the happiness of the young bride with the holy and terrible fervour of the mature woman. For Bridget, seeking consolation for her pain, had found it in religion. He would never forget the night of her conversion. Fresh from a meeting in the Evangelical Hall she had come home drunk with exaltation and wild with a new-found power. The eyes burned in their sockets, not like moonstones, but with the glare of the prophetess.

"Repent," she cried, "before ut's too late. Mine eyes have seen the comin' of the Lord! "

It was the face of a fanatic. He didn't know her.

"Wally Puckle," she said, "get down on yer knees. I'm goin' to pray for ye. I'm goin' to pray for the salvation of yer sinful soul, I'm goin' to set ye on the road to glory or die in the attimpt. From now on ye shall be smitten wid the rod and scourged wid the whip. Get down, I say! "

So ended the married life of Mr. Puckle. Bridget, he judged, was ruined; she had become a half-wit, and in so doing she had also become, literally, a holy terror. She preached hell-fire, and brimstone, and the wrath of God at race meetings, on street corners, and from a variety of pulpits in dingy buildings down unlovely streets. Mr. Puckle couldn't stand it. Whenever Bridget was home the apartment rang with sound and fury, for she could play the harmonium and lift up her voice. And one afternoon, having written his good-byes, he left home for ever. His note was simple, devoid of emotional frills. It said:

Dear Bridget,—I guess we gotta part, I guess we'll never make a go of it any more. All this psalm-singing and raising hell, it was just driving me nuts. Well, that's how it is, so I guess I've just gotta say good-bye and good luck.

WALLY.

Through his glasses Captain Sale saw that Mr. Wix was towing Mr. Puckle. He immediately ordered the boat which had been sculling around in case of accident to a

swimmer to meet them. Mr. Wix protested that he could manage, but the two men in the boat suggested that perhaps they'd better take Mr. Puckle off his hands, and a moment later they hauled him into the stern-sheets. He looked very much the worse for wear when finally he was taken aboard the yacht, and when it was seen that he was unsteady on his feet he was made a target for sympathy by the womenfolk. They sat him down, and fussed over him, and Ada Letts ran for brandy, and everybody, nineteen to the dozen, asked what happened.

"I guess," said Mr. Puckle, much revived after a strong draught, "I came over queer."

"What a mercy," said Ada Letts, "that Mr. Wix was near."

"Indeed, yes," said Lady Eleanor, whilst Kay French, grave-faced, shot a questioning glance at that gentleman. "You can't ever thank him enough, Mr. Puckle, you must be very grateful."

"Sure," returned Mr. Puckle. "I'll tell the world I'm grateful."

"Pooh!" rejoined Mr. Wix. "It was nothing, nothing at all. I did exactly what I'd do for anyone else in the same circumstances. And that means that I half-drowned him. A very clumsy effort indeed. I'm afraid I'm no expert at life-saving."

3

The *Aphrodite* was under way once more; the collective concern of the ladies (even Mrs. Weiss had offered him smelling-salts) which had centred around Mr. Puckle was now vested in Ada Letts, who had him to herself on the aft-deck. Looking at his face she saw nothing there but the extreme pallor of a survivor, and she felt pity.

"How do you feel?" she asked, with sympathy.

Mr. Puckle said weakly that he felt like a chewed-up tiger's breakfast.

"Would you like another brandy?"

"Don't you bother, baby. It's kind of nice and peaceful sitting here. Thanks a lot for what you've done."

"I haven't done anything. You're a naughty man to go out so far."

"I guess," said Mr. Puckle, "maybe I bit off more than I could chew."

"It would have been pretty serious if Mr. Wix hadn't been there. What happened?"

"I sort of passed out."

"You must have swallowed a lot of water to make you look like that."

"Sure I swallowed a lot of water. I swallowed gallons. I guess I swallowed half the goddam ocean."

"And Mr. Wix just happened to be on the spot. I saw him swimming out there about ten minutes after you'd gone."

"You bet your life he was on the spot, sister."

"I should think he's very strong."

"Strong?" Mr. Puckle sat up. "Listen, baby. That guy's as strong as a bulldozer, he's strong as a hundred-ton crane. Yeah, I'll tell the world he's strong."

Ada Letts considered for a while. Then:

"It must be terrible to—to nearly drown. To look at the sky, and the sun, and the lovely clouds and think you're seeing them for the last time."

"You've said a mouthful," agreed Mr. Puckle. "And there was something else, baby. This ship, and the noises of you folks making whoopee, sort of far away like a last good-bye. I guess that was fierce, I guess that hit me where it hurts. Still, here I am, and I don't aim to say good-bye yet awhile. You and me's gonna have fun and games."

"They say," said Ada Letts, "that a drowning man gets a conspectus of all his life, that he sees all his past appear before him in a flash. I've often wondered if that's true."

"Don't you believe it, sister. I guess a drowning man's in one hell of a panic to save his skin. I guess his mind

just goes dead on him. I guess every bit of him is sure fighting mad to keep on living." Mr. Puckle laughed under his breath. "Funny, though, what you do think about when you come to. I was away back in nineteen-nought-six. I laid on my back there, beat to the world, and thought of Bridget in her wedding dress, white as a nurse's apron, and me with a white carnation in me buttonhole, all full of beans and proud as a king, and wishing the whole world could see what a classy number I'd picked for myself. Nineteen-nought-six. Thirty years back. And now——"

Sadly, Mr. Puckle shook his head. "I guess you can only be young once, baby. I guess you can never get back that feeling of being twenty years old with a honeymoon ahead of you and not giving a damn whether it's the Fourth of July or Christmas Day."

"I didn't know you were married," said Ada Letts.

"I was," returned Mr. Puckle. "I left her twenty years back. Gee, she was a sweet kid when I married her, I'll tell the world she was a cute number. And inside of ten years——"

Mr. Puckle paused. "Miss Letts, you wouldn't believe. Religion's a terrible thing. If I talked myself silly I couldn't tell you the difference it made to that girl. Never happy unless she was raising hell with the old harmonium and hollering Onward Christian Soldiers like she would wake the dead. And when she got to work on me, saving my soul, I quit."

He shook his head. "She was strong as a blacksmith. She used to beat the daylight outta me, and, by golly, pray while she was doing it. Poor old Bridget. Last I heard of her she was a missionary out East. By God, I pity them heathen. She'll sure stir 'em up. A stick in one hand and the Gospel in the other, that's Bridget."

Mr. Puckle shivered. "Guess it's turned cooler. Say, sister—I'll just run down and get into my clothes. I'll be up in a jiff with a coupla drinks. Will you wait?"

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Ida Disposes

1

MRS. WEISS rounded the chair-locker on the aft-deck, saw her daughter sitting in a deck-chair, and bore down on her like an indignant pouter pigeon.

"Oh, there you are, Ida. I've been looking all over the ship for you."

"No," said Ida, "not all over the ship. There are chain-lockers, and bilges, and boiler-rooms and things."

"You know what I mean, Ida. Where have you been?"

Ida had been closeted with Mr. Brindle examining the nearly finished rug, but she saw no reason why she should noise this abroad.

"I've been sitting here, Mrs. Weiss dear."

"Now that's a story, Ida. I've been around this deck twice, and——"

"O.K., momma, it's a story. I should worry."

"Really, Ida! Of all——"

"Relax, darling, relax," advised Ida. "Me, I've got everything under control. I was just enjoying the sunshine and the ozone and what-have-you."

"Isn't there another chair?" asked Mrs. Weiss with plaintive asperity, looking around.

"Sure. In the chair-locker. Help yourself."

Mrs. Weiss opened the locker and tugged at a chair. Rattle. Bang. She sat down, resentful.

"In my young days children valued their parents. No daughter would ever have seen her mother struggling——"

"That was away back in the eighteen-seventies, momma dear. And anyway, I stopped being a child ten years ago. What's on your mind?"

"Thinking about your welfare, that's what is on my mind. Planning for your—huh—happiness. I must say,

Ida, it's a thankless task. You can deny yourself seventy times seven, and all you get in return——"

Ida giggled. "Seventy times seven. Say, that gives me one big laugh. Snap out of it, Mrs. Weiss dear. Be your age. And, tell me, what's your great big mother-heart been planning for little Ida?"

"Well," said Mrs. Weiss, "I suppose you haven't forgotten it's your birthday in two day's time? I thought I'd give a party for you at the Florence, in Malta."

"That'll sure make me happy," said Ida, dryly. "Yes, I guess I'll just swoon away with happiness."

Mrs. Weiss ignored the sarcasm. "I thought we'd have Maryland chicken, and lobster Newburg, and corn soup, and strawberry shortcake. The chicken and the lobster——well, they're your favourite dishes, Ida. And I thought just a quiet party. You, and I, and, say, Mr. Dunne."

"So that's what you thought," said Ida. "I guess you'll have to think again. In this case mamma proposes, and Ida disposes. Just you, and I, and Mr. Dunne. Say, that's swell, that's dinkum. And I'll bet you'd contrive to inform Mr. Dunne that of all the men I'd ever met I'd most prefer to have him celebrate my birthday. You know sometimes, Mrs. Weiss darling, you're a bit sickening. Why don't you stand off one of these times and take a good look at yourself? Now listen. You're going to give a party. Thanks a lot. I sure do appreciate it. But what I want to say is this, mamma dear: that you either invite the whole bunch or we call it off."

Mrs. Weiss bit her lip. Time was flying away. The prospects of becoming related to the aristocracy were not advanced. She said:

"Really, Ida, you're the most difficult——"

"Sure I'm difficult," interrupted the girl. "I aim to be difficult when folks try to shove me around, arrange my life for me."

"I'm thinking only of your own good. If you'd only listen to me, Ida dear——"

"I'm listening. Right now I'm listening. Go ahead."

"Mr. Dunne loves this yacht. He can't bear the thought of parting with it. But unless he can—huh—find some way out, some way of augmenting his income, he'll have to. I was talking to him yesterday."

"I wouldn't want two guesses at what you said to him."

"I've got nothing to hide, Ida. I—huh—we discussed you."

"With the discussion all on your side?" mocked Ida.
"How doth the little busy bee! "

"I know," went on Mrs. Weiss, "you don't give me credit for much sense. But, if you think I was blatant, you're mistaken. I think I managed to drop—huh—a seed or two. And if you'll only co-operate, dear, I believe they may bear fruit."

Ida laughed aloud. "Seeds," she hooted, "fruit! Christopher, you'll be the death of me."

She dried her eyes. "That's enough of Mr. Dunne, Mrs. Weiss dear. Any more laughs like that and I'll dislocate my insides. About this party. The whole bunch, or none at all. That agreed? Right. And there's one more thing. The cake. Had you forgotten it? Twenty-six candles, a happy birthday to little Ida, and what-have-you."

"Very well, dear," sighed Mrs. Weiss. Uncertainly she looked at her daughter's face, still wearing the marks of a waning glee. "May I—huh—may I ask you something, without being laughed to scorn? "

"I'll be grave as a sexton."

"Will you be very nice to him? "

"Do unto others," said Ida, "as they do unto you. Mr. Dunne couldn't be nicer. I think he's swell. Sure I'll be nice to him. Water upon the seeds, so to speak."

"Thank you, Ida. And I'd better tell them at the Florence to arrange for a band and reserve the small ball-room. You know we are expected in Malta to-morrow night? I shall inform them by radio."

2

Meantime, away in England, Mrs. Harriwell, deprived of the presence of Herbert French, was a very worried woman. Her late husband had left instructions in his will that all his paintings (he had some hundreds of them, large and small) and *objets d'art* were to be catalogued for sale, and disposed of not later than sixty days after his demise, the proceeds of the sale to be made over entirely and unconditionally to provide Art scholarships, pensions for worthy artists who had fallen into destitution, and various other benefactions to the Art world.

Although Harriwell House was a massive building, it had not been found possible to hang all the pictures its late owner had acquired; particularly was this so with the smaller works, which had been housed in drawers amongst masses of papers, on top of the bookshelves in the library, in cupboards all over the place, and overflowing from trunks on to the window-sills in attics. Harriwell had been a crank about pictures; he had attended every Art sale in London; he had travelled much abroad and come home loaded with pictures good, bad, and indifferent. He knew very little about Art. Like many another man he knew what he liked, and ninety per cent of what he liked was bad. But he was shrewd enough to place much of his buying in the hands of Duvelli, who was London's leading Art dealer and whose knowledge of all the various schools was unrivalled. He gave Duvelli *carte blanche* to buy what he fancied, and under his expert guidance a valuable collection was built up.

In the course of his peregrinations Duvelli came across the Chanyu miniatures. They were probably the only instance of an artist combining genius with pornography, and, knowing that there was a sure market for such things, he bought them. Certainly he had no notion of selling them to Harriwell, and he was secretly surprised when Harriwell bought them. On the occasion of the transaction Herbert

French was at the other end of the library seemingly absorbed with some correspondence. But, although the two men talked in low tones, he heard enough to lay the foundation for future wrongdoing.

And now Mrs. Harriwell was worried. She had been brought up in a strict Nonconformist household; she had married, as is the case with most Dissenters, within her own circle, which means that she married a Wesleyan, and a Wesleyan who was to become not only a lay preacher, but renowned for his munificent gifts to the Methodist Church. That such pictures as the Chanyu miniatures could exist she had never dreamed; she had lived a sheltered life in the most literal sense of the term, and when Andrew Harriwell was fool enough to show them to her she was shocked beyond words. She never referred to the incident again. For her the thing was an enormity outside the bounds of conversation, and she did her best to blot it from her memory.

She almost succeeded. But with the death of her husband alarm seized her as the memory of those pictures woke up with a new vividness. There were masses and masses of papers to be gone through. Her late husband's solicitor was in possession of his keys and roamed the house at will. Duvelli was ill, reported to be dying, and he alone might have helped her. And the thought that her husband's solicitor might at any moment come across that unlovely secret terrified her. No one, not a soul, must know; Andrew's outward seeming of a saint must be preserved at all costs. Desperately she searched. There were some six thousand books in the library, and she worked far into the night, into many nights, removing every one. It was not until she was at her wit's end that she bethought herself of Herbert French. An hour later she remembered the name of the yacht and sat down to write her message. It read:

My late husband acquired a set of miniatures some time ago which I am very anxious to find. Have vainly searched

high and low. Do you know where they were kept? Utmost urgency. Please reply without delay. Mildred Harriwell.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Happy Birthday

1

FROM ALL POINTS of the Grand Harbour at Malta the dhaisa-men converged on the *Aphrodite*. Their dhaisas were small, gaily painted boats with skittish prows and a variety of Christian names inscribed on the backboards, and the dhaisa-men stood up amidships and sculled with a forward motion of the arms.

The harbour was full of sound; the yells of the dhaisa-men competed with the hoarse whistles of tugs, with the shrill piping of ferryboats plying from Valletta to Sliema, with the brassiness of the Royal Marine Band playing on the quarter-deck of the Flagship, with the laughing cries of Maltese women washing clothes for the Navy on the rocks which fringed the water, with the eternal monotony of Malta's church bells.

It was seven-fifteen. The party at the Florence was timed for eight o'clock. The guests, assembled on deck, were in evening dress, Mrs. Weiss stupefying the eye with eruptions of pink tulle and yards of sash, Ida Weiss looking surprisingly delicious in golden velvet, Kay French reducing Mr. Wix to reverence in a confection of black chiffon against which her lovely hair was fierce like a pale yellow flame. Mr. Wix himself had risen to unexpected heights of sartorial bizarrerie in the shape of a black cloak which, cut away in front, hung in fluted folds over his magnificent shoulders and was fastened with an ornamental silver clasp at the neck. And Kay French, sidling up to him, told him that he looked crashingly distinguished and

romantic like a Roumanian Ambassador or a Spanish Grandee.

"Thank you, my dear," he murmured. "I bought it in a moment of abandonment, and this is the first time I've ever worn it. You don't think it's perhaps rather *outré* and musical comedy?" He gave her a long admiring glance. "What can I say about you? There are no words. You make me think of moonlight, and balconies, and sweet music. And you look like a Serene Highness."

They stepped down the accommodation ladder into the waiting dhaisas, beamed upon by Captain Sale, overlooked shyly by Mr. Brindle for whom Ida Weiss was the first wonder of the world. And when, suddenly catching his eye, she waved to him with a glad smile, he was so overcome that he forgot to salute. Transfixed, he stood at gaze as the boats moved away like a man who has received a revelation of beauty and an overwhelming disclosure of bliss. For Mr. Brindle an Ida Weiss in white linen was approachable and earthly, but this golden vision flashing in the evening sun was the stuff of Paradise and unreality.

"Smells," said Mr. Wix, as they set foot on the landing-stage. "Smells, bells, and yells."

"A comprehensive description of Malta in three words," said Dunne.

And, indeed, it was so. The collective smell of Malta rose up from the white dusty roads, was mixed up with the glare of the white flat-roofed houses, with the bells of goats, of mules trotting in the shafts of cabs, of fat sweating priests chanting Aves in the dimness of Rococo churches; with the yells of brown-faced cabbies suing for custom and the tinniness of electric pianos echoing in frowsty saloons. Garlic was in it, and dried dung; the aromatic sharpness of oranges and lemons from the yellow groves; the sourness of perspiration, the cloying sweetness of cheap scent, the abomination of drains, of fly-blown meat, of billy goats polluting the hot wind.

Laughing and carefree, the party piled into the spindly

cabs with white awnings. In an atmosphere like that of a bakehouse the gaunt, dispirited mules clip-clopped them along roads which danced with a haze of heat. From the battlements of the fort in Valetta the report of the sunset gun rumbled and clattered in diminishing echoes, and the silvery notes of a bugle trembled on the parched air as the Union Jack fluttered slowly to earth. Herbert French, seated opposite his sister and Mr. Wix, forgot the shabbiness of his evening clothes and stared entranced at the novelty of a strange land; at the white houses with awnings over Venetian blinds, at the naval ratings in white duck-suits, at the Maltese women in their black hoods and veils, at the palms and cactus-bushes torpid in a film of dust. Mr. Wix leaned forward and read the names on the tariff: Bahar-ic-ciaghk, Birchircara, Cospicua, Ghallis, Hagiar Kim, and, suddenly filled with a sense of the unusual, softly chuckled.

"Grand," he said.

"What is?" asked Kay French.

"Cospicua," said Mr. Wix, "Hagiar Kim, Birchircara, instead of Tottenham Court Road and Marble Arch. And this moment. You and I and Herbert here in this cab. The heat. The smell. I've been trying to get outside myself, sort of see J. W. Wix with an objective eye, watch his reactions to the foreign strand. And somehow I can't fit him into the setting. Bacon and eggs, the morning paper, mowing the lawn, listening to the racing results, catching the train for Brighton—that's real, that's me. But this—just a dream. Eh, Herbert? How d'you feel, old boy?"

Herbert French managed a smile. "Limp," he said. "I never could put up with a lot of heat."

2

Even from a distance of miles, and through the medium of radio, Mrs. Weiss had managed to impress on the

management of the Florence that she was a woman of importance, and the private room where the guests foregathered was gay with Chinese lanterns and heavy with the scent of sacked flower gardens. The table was perfection. Damask gleamed, cutlery and glassware winked and flashed under the glory of chandeliers, the cake, sumptuous and splendid, was a superimposed affair of three tiers with the American flag upstanding on the topmost, with iced rosettes, an intricacy of piped designs, gold and silver comfits, Ionic gilt pillars, tiny black-and-gold candles in mounting groups of twelve, eight, and six. On a raised dais at one end of the room was a band of twelve performers, and this band on the entry of the party stood up smartly and played the Star-Spangled Banner, to the disconcertion of everybody save Mrs. Weiss who, more regal than any Lady of the White House could ever hope to be, inclined her head with gracious condescension, whereupon Ida said, *sotto voce*:

"Say, momma—is this the birthday of George Washington or the Fourth of July? Be yourself. Put on any more acts like that and I quit." And then, as if suddenly electrified, she leapt on to the dais, spoke swiftly to the conductor, turned, with an imp in each eye, and flung herself into a tap-dance which was surprisingly expert. No amateur performance this, but the finished facility of the professional, with her whole body swaying and swirling in the neatest complement of motion. In complete surrender to the joy of the moment Ida Weiss had let herself go; she was a gamin, she was a corybant whose rattling feet sketched a gay swift pattern on the boards of a stage. The guests clapped, they cheered, they cried out as, with a final and superlative effort, skirt flaring about her knees, she brought the dance to a close, and laughing, leapt lightly down.

"My dear," said Lady Eleanor warmly, "you've surprised us all. That was stunning."

"Absolutely first class. Thank you very much," said Dunne.

"I envy you," said Mr. Wix. "You must be very fit indeed."

Mr. Puckle said: "Gee, Miss Weiss. I guess I've gotta hand it to you. You sure made me proud to be an American citizen. That was the tops, I'll tell the world it was the tops."

And Ada Letts murmured: "I was thrilled to death. I'll never forget it. Marvellous. You'd be a sensation on the stage."

"Folks," said Ida Weiss, "I guess this is embarrassing. Shall we sample the cocktails?"

3

Mr. Wix rose to his feet at the table. Under the glittering chandelier his brown eyes rested fondly, sadly, on Kay French, moved away to survey the Dresden china beauty of Lady Eleanor, rested for a moment on Ida Weiss in her golden gown, on the imperial bust of Mrs. Weiss and the gentle smile of Ada Letts. His glance dallied with the hooked nose and the bright black orbs of Mr. Puckle, and the picture of a fine afternoon came and went in a flash; of the warm blue sea, and the face of a trapped animal so close to his own. He looked at Herbert French from whose face the marks of worry had largely vanished, and he was glad for Kay's sake, and then he looked at Dunne who was raptly studying Lady Eleanor.

Mr. Wix saw in all these faces something new, for he saw them with the eyes of that other Mr. Wix who was always laying in wait to entrap him. The other Mr. Wix had emerged from ambush only this morning, at seven o'clock to be precise, and the confrontation had taken place in the bathroom. There he was, the old and seasoned adversary, the ghost who had stolen from him the happiness of uncounted days, the terrible and thirsty entity who drank double Wixes, who gripped him by the arm and led him into the darkness which blacked out all memory and left

him only the bitterness of regret. There was no question of putting up a fight. Mr. Wix had been through it all before, and he knew that this thing was powerful as the Lord of Hosts. And that morning he had a double whisky in his cabin instead of breakfast.

"Oh, and steward," he had said, "you'd better bring me a couple of bottles."

The journey had begun. He had taken neither lunch nor tea. And at this birthday dinner-party he had waved away Maryland chicken and lobster Newburg. He was, he said, chuckling, on a diet. Slimming. No thanks, really—no food.

"But this Château-Yquem—nectar, ambrosia."

He had drained his glass. Twice, thrice the waiter had refilled it. Whisky, cocktails, the wine of France, old Roederer brandy, the first squeeze of the grape. The journey was well under way. And now he stood up, impressively sober. Only the glitter in his brown eyes testified to his powers of assimilation.

Mr. Wix felt in himself an excellence of power. Strength sang in his veins, tingled in his finger-tips, in his biceps and his thighs. He stood on a pinnacle of fitness and glory. With a wave of the hand he felt that he could unseat monuments and instigate the retreat of armies. He felt grand, and omnipotent, and all-knowing. He was Zeus, and Thor, and Jupiter.

He mopped his brow with the handkerchief which he carried in his right hand. A chuckle shook him, quivered in his shoulders, was gone, as he looked again at Kay French and felt that pang of sadness. Not yet had he begun to forget. On and off that day she had pleaded with him. On and off he had made the promise of just one more and had broken it. He felt a vague shame; he knew all at once that he had finished with it, that he would never take another drink; and he knew in the next moment that nothing could save him. He reached out a hand for his glass.

"Ladies and gentlemen. It is my very great pleasure to give you a toast. I give you Miss Weiss—or may we call her Ida? Yes, I think so. May she ever grow younger. May her accomplishments never be dimmed." Mr. Wix raised his wine. "My dear, a happy birthday to you, and many, many more."

They stood. They sang. "And so say all of us, and so say all of us . . ."

By the time they had come to an end Mr. Wix had moved round the table to Ida's chair, where he presented his parcel with all the deference of an ambassador submitting his offering to a queen.

"We shall all be very happy," he said, "if you will accept this little gift. Not much choice in Malta, I'm afraid, but I think I may say that it's offered in a spirit of affection."

Ida Weiss arose. Her eyes were brimming. She gave a queer little laugh. In a low tone she said:

"Thanks a lot. Thanks ever so much. I guess it's sweet of you all. You're a grand crowd. I didn't expect——"

Hastily, she sat down.

4

The small ballroom belied its name; it was big, it had four chandeliers, a beautiful shiny floor, masses and masses of bougainvillæa; of purple, mauve, yellow, and crimson flowers whose colours were vivid like lacquer; it had a Steinway grand, an augmented orchestra of twenty players, mural paintings of the Knights of Malta, and luxurious settees discreetly concealed by palms in tubs. And now the guests were dancing to the orchestra's echoing harmonies which, by a trick of acoustics, seemed to have all the body of the London Philharmonic. The harmonies consisted of Tchaïkovski's lovely waltz from the Serenade for Strings, and Mrs. Weiss, all eager and flustered, watched her daughter dancing with Michael Dunne, and sent up mental prayers for the fruition of her dearest

dream. Dunne was holding her very closely, and smiling down into her face as he talked; and Ida was smiling too, her eyes like stars looking up into his; Ida was, indeed, transfigured to-night—never had she looked more attractive than under the softness of the single chandelier whose light had been cunningly muted to an old rose tint. On pins and needles to know what they were saying she strained her ears to catch the drift of it every time they passed her settee. She failed. With her eyes on distant and elusive bliss she beseeched in the privacy of her mind: *Please let it be so, please let it happen.*

Mr. Wix said: "We'll sit this out, shall we, my dear?"

Reaching the settee they sat down. Mr. Wix put up a hand for the waiter. This, thought Kay French, isn't just drinking, there's something ferocious about it. It's slow murder. She looked at him; a long glance in which there was pity, and the recognition of an old friend. For this was Mr. Double Wix of the Red Lion, Mr. Double Wix of the one-man ballet, potent with the grace of high kicks and all the perfections of the ballroom dance. She had given up trying to dissuade him; indeed, she realized with an unpleasant thrill that he was no longer there to be persuaded. Like a man who walks in his sleep he had lain down his ego and was the prey of a dark and subconscious compulsion.

The waiter reappeared, set the drinks down on a table by their side, bowed low over Mr. Wix's hand to receive a two-shilling tip. Her heart ached to see such misuse of money, and she said:

"Wixyl! Wouldn't sixpence have done?"

"I shall pass," murmured Mr. Wix, "through this world but once—you know how it goes, my dear. Go, sell all thou hast, and give to the poor. I feel very generous when I'm with you. Giving two bob to the waiter—it's a sort of thank-offering for your company. Anyway, what's money? Dross, my dear, dross. Moth and rust doth corrupt, thieves break in and steal."

He began to chuckle. He had, she thought, extraordinary teeth for a man of his age, the kindest eyes, the loveliest crinkly white hair; he was so clean, and pink, and endearing. He took her hand. His voice was a rich caress.

"Darling. Do you know what you mean to me? You mean sailing a boat on a pond, the smell of corn in a granary, building castles on Margate sands, feeling for my stocking on Christmas morning, Gamages catalogue the week before my birthday, kissing a girl in the moonlight when I was eighteen years old—all the happy things I ever did, the sum total of all my joys. It's all there. It's in your voice, your lovely smile, the delight of your walk, the touch of your hand."

Mr. Wix stared into her eyes with a look so lost, so desolate, that she felt she couldn't bear it any longer.

"Don't, Wixy," she said. "You make me think of melancholy evenings, of days dying to the toll of a church bell."

"Darling," he muttered. "My beautiful darling, my love. No one has ever been to me what you are. You don't think I'm talking nonsense? I mean it with all my soul."

A tear brimmed bright on each of her eyelids.

"Oh, Wixy!" she breathed. "Can't you stop it?"

Herbert passed them, holding Ada Letts, waved, and she forced a smile, waving back.

"Stop what, my dear?"

"This terrible drinking. It frightens me. You'll kill yourself if you go on."

"Ah!" muttered Mr. Wix, "if only I could. Listen, lovely lady. My mother drank herself to death. I remember my father finding the empty bottles locked away in drawers, in cupboards, hidden behind boxes in the cellar, buried in the garden. My aunt was a millstone round her husband's neck, a cross for his back. She pawned everything in the house to get drink, including his clothes, the cutlery, the very carpets. She was an extraordinarily nice woman. My grandfather—but why go on? You see how

it is? It frightens me, too. Don't think that I haven't fought against it. It amounts to this: that I must give in or go mad. Can you understand?"

"Yes. Oh, yes, I can understand."

His hand reached out for the glass, which he contemplated for some time as if he expected it to give up some secret, then drained it and set it down.

"If only I could get drunk," he said. "If only it would sicken me. But there isn't a ha'porth of nausea in a gallon of the stuff. Appetite feeds on appetite. It's a curse, my dear. I'm possessed, I'm like the swine that ran down a steep place into the sea. So there it is. Kismet holds my hand, and leads me into the dark valley."

Suddenly, Mr. Wix stretched out a hand, chuckling, and pinched her cheek.

"Don't take too much notice of me, don't take me seriously. I'm not worthy to kiss the hem of your garment, and I'm upsetting you with my damned whining. But I wanted to tell you this. I'm not myself in these . . . bouts. I do unreasonable things, and people tell me about them afterwards. I insult my friends, I bring myself into contempt. Will you forgive me if I do anything, or say anything, to offend?"

"You won't do that, Wixy, to me," she said.

"No," he said, after a long pause, "I don't think I ever could. And there's another thing. About Port Said. Things might go wrong. A week, a fortnight—I don't know how long this will last. Will you remember that I've got to see Jim Sefton at the aerodrome? Will you keep me up to scratch? But of course you will. You're very capable. And the parcel is already addressed and sealed. Herbert didn't even open it. All he wants is to be rid of it. Did I tell you that he had a notion to throw it into the sea? Still, he's bucked up, he's improved—look at him over there making the running with Miss Letts."

"He likes you," said Kay French. "You've been a tower of strength to him. I can't ever thank you enough.

I believe I've said that before. It sounds so flat, words are such puny things, and if there's ever anything I can do for you, anything at all——"

Mr. Wix mopped his beaded face. Soaked with perspiration, his collar was visibly wilting. He smiled at her with the little-boy smile which he had never lost.

"Just go on being yourself, my dear, just go on putting up with me. I'll never ask you for anything you couldn't give. For me, you're different from all the others. And there have been others, you know. I'm not a monk. Perhaps you knew that?"

"I've always known it. I knew it when I first met you outside my cabin door. You're very attractive. And . . . listen, Wixy. There isn't anything that you couldn't ask me for, not a thing that I wouldn't gladly give."

Mr. Wix looked into her shining eyes. They were full of the promise of bliss, splendid with the glory of the sun. This, surely, of all moments, was the most unreal. He tried to speak, and failed. From somewhere very far away came the faint sound of clapping as the orchestra came to the end of the dance. The little-boy smile was gone, and on his face was the intolerable look of the lost, a wearying burden of sadness.

5

Outside the ballroom was a conservatory, and Dunne, who had just torn himself away from Mrs. Weiss, found Lady Eleanor there sitting in a Lloyd Loom chair enjoying a cigarette.

"Hello," she said. "So you've escaped."

Dunne flung himself into a chair. "Have you a cigarette?" he asked. "I left mine on the table, and I simply haven't the guts to go near that woman again just now."

"I can believe it," said Lady Eleanor. "It's amazing that Ida should be her daughter. They're so unlike each other."

"Ida's a peach," said Dunne. "Ida's all right. A straight-shooter with no nonsense about her. As for her

insufferable parent—she's impossible, she's preposterous, she's the most ferocious snob I've ever met."

"I shouldn't let it ruin your peace of mind," said Lady Eleanor. "There's a funny side to it, you know. She's a ridiculous woman."

"I'm afraid my sense of humour doesn't function in this case," said Dunne. "A woman like that can upset the whole voyage. Without being downright rude to her I don't see how I'm to stop her gallop."

"Aren't you taking her too seriously?"

"I don't think so. It's gone beyond the ridiculous. To me it's unpleasant, it's slimy. You know how I'm fixed about the yacht, Lady Eleanor. I can't possibly run her on my income. Sooner or later I'll have to sell. And it'll be a bitter blow. I've got a sort of feeling about the *Aphrodite*. I can't explain it, and I don't suppose I could make you understand. But it's there, and it grows. I ought never to have sailed in her. By the way, you haven't got a drink. Will you——"

"No thanks. Do go on. I'm frightfully interested. And I can quite understand your feeling for the yacht. I know how lovely she is."

"Good. Mrs. Weiss knows it, too. I've got my own blabbing lip to thank for that. And she was kind enough to explain how I could remedy this state of affairs. If she didn't say in so many words that Ida was ready to marry me, she dropped some pretty hefty hints."

Lady Eleanor gurgled. "It's a situation," she said, "not without piquancy."

"It may be piquant from your point of view, dear lady," said Dunne, rather heatedly, "but from mine it's damned objectionable. That woman surpasses all the bounds of decency. Bribery and corruption, that's what it amounts to. She babbled about Ida's sweet disposition and unselfish nature, and she dedaubed the picture liberally with dollar-bills. Ida's large fortune, she said, would naturally form a fund on which her husband might draw, and this

fortune would be increased, when her uncle died, to the tune of one million nine hundred thousand dollars. Furthermore she, Mrs. Weiss herself, would personally settle a matter of one hundred thousand pounds on her son-in-law. It was disgusting, it was obscene. And all this for the trumpery fiddle-faddle which she calls race, tradition, roots away back in history, a nodding acquaintance through somebody's ancestors with Henry the Eighth. I didn't know such women existed. It surpasses belief. Good God, she's nothing but a drivelling sot."

"And what," asked Lady Eleanor, "was your reply to all this?"

"I told her that I thought I detected something personal in her remarks. I suggested that it was possible she was beating about my own particular bush. Wouldn't it be much better to leave Ida to work out her own salvation? *Couldn't she see that the whole subject was most distasteful and embarrassing?*"

"And what's your attitude to Ida?"

"Ida's grand. She's damned good company. I've never thought about her as anything but a friend."

"It's an awful lot of money to turn down."

"Is it? Well, I object to the whole filthy business. I won't be dragooned for all the millions in Christendom."

"I'm not sure," said Lady Eleanor, "if that isn't a moral pronouncement of the utmost nobility."

"As for *Aphrodite*," he said, "I shall sell her at the first opportunity. I should have sold her in the first place. After all, only the darlings of this world can hope to cruise in spacious luxury. I'll buy a cabin-cruiser."

"And be for ever dissatisfied. I think you're foolish, my dear boy."

"For God's sake!" he cried. "Do you want me to marry this girl?"

"You needn't be so vehement. I only said that you were foolish. I don't know any other man who would have refused such a tempting offer."

He looked at her. She had all the delicacy of a Chinese print, the exquisite finish of a lovely toy. He said:

"Perhaps I have reasons, strong reasons. Has it occurred to you, Eleanor—I may call you so?—that true love between the contracting parties is indispensable to a happy marriage? Or do you think that's old-fashioned nonsense?"

"True love? I'm not sure—Michael. Mutual respect, tolerance, kindness, a harmony of tastes—yes. But——"

"I'll have no buts," he interrupted. "You're quibbling, you're talking nonsense, you're denying your own instincts—you, who were as surely made for love as a bow for its arrow."

"Isn't this conversation getting rather out of hand?"

"So," he said, rising, "I shall buy a cabin-cruiser, and I shall call her *Eleanor*. And you——"

He took her hands, raised her gently from her chair.

"Tell me, Eleanor, how do you feel about it?"

"Feel? My dear man," she said, "I'm just stunned." Suddenly she giggled. "I'm not laughing at you. Something just popped into my head. A bowler hat, and a shabby umbrella. And—yes—I could do with a drink. Shall we?"

CHAPTER TWENTY

Mr. Brindle Tête-à-tête

THE WIRELESS-ROOM on board the *Aphrodite* was a mere sentry-box tucked away between funnel and chart-house, and into it had been packed besides the radio-equipment a desk, a chair, an oilskin suit and sou'wester belonging to the second mate, two pairs of sea-boots, the property of Mr. Brindle, stacks of old magazines and newspapers which belonged to nobody in particular, and a rather hefty statue of a nude coloured lady with smiling teeth and eyes of mauve-coloured glass of which no one knew the origin.

Some mariner of another day, conceiving himself to have unearthed a treasure in some junk-shop, had lodged her in the corner with a cord tied about her waist and carried to two hooks in the bulkhead, and Mr. Brindle (who now sat at the desk) never tired of speculating upon her history as it touched that of the unknown art patron who had carried her on board, immured her amongst the sea-boots and the magazines, and left her to an uninteresting fate.

High above her head in her right hand she carried a torch. The cord around her waist was slack, giving her play of three or four inches, and periodically she lurched forward with the helpless motion of the inanimate, only to fall back with a little bump as the ship rolled the other way.

Outside a full gale was blowing; the *Aphrodite* was at the mercy of big seas; she was being hustled and harassed, and pounded, lifted up, hurled down into dark pits whence she emerged quivering to stare wildly with her red and green bow-lights into a pitch blackness which contained only violence and the promise of ruin. Her entire fabric trembled as she was pulled up in her tracks by massive and dislocating blows. Harried and buffeted from pillar to post, battered ferociously by mountainous waves, she staggered and reeled like a drunken harridan lost in a wild night. The seas lipped over the fo'c'sle-head, poured down into the waist, rushed aft like a stampeding herd, and fetched up against the bridge with a roar and a crash that shook the ship from stern to stern. Howling wind, pitch darkness, a pandemonium of clanging doors, of anchors gone adrift, of things cutting loose and rumbling dangerously about the decks. The passengers in their cabins listened with blank minds and waited for the dawn.

Mr. Brindle did neither of these things. Mr. Brindle was a seaman whose philosophy enabled him to take such things as a matter of course. The winds might blow, the seas might contend, the carpenter might report six feet of water in the forepeak, the ship might give every evidence

of suicidal intent, but Mr. Brindle would write in the log: *4 a.m. Course S. by E. Blowing a full gale, seas very heavy, making four knots.* And now, Mr. Brindle, with a pile of reading-matter cascading on to the desk from the shelf above, calmly brushed it aside and gave ear to the Morse which was singing its musical dots and dashes in his earphones.

The *Aphrodite* didn't carry a wireless-operator; it had been deemed by Dunne a waste of money to carry an officer to deal with the few messages they would require to send. Wireless duties could very well be left to Mr. Brindle and the second mate. They kept no watch. If they cared to listen to other shipping they could do so or not, as they wished.

It was ten p.m. Mr. Brindle, who had the middle watch on the bridge, finding that he couldn't sleep, had opened the door of the wireless-room and popped inside. The place was snug; it was, what every sailor longs to possess, a caboosh, a private place to which he might retire to meditate, or read, or write letters. True, he had his cabin, but that was subject to the vibration, the rattle and chatter of the steering-engine which was located practically next door, and whenever he could he escaped from it to the comparative quiet of the wireless-room.

So there was Mr. Brindle, with the earphones on, idly listening to the talk of other ships, when he suddenly pricked up his ears as he heard Malta calling *Aphrodite*. He bent over and threw in the switch. In another moment he was transmitting his acknowledgment of the call. And then he began to write down the message on his pad.

'Mr. Herbert French, S.Y. Aphrodite. My late husband acquired a set of miniatures some time ago which . . .

Having got the complete message he tucked it into his breast pocket, buttoned his coat, and opened the door. With a rush and a roar the wind was upon him, almost snatching the door out of his hand so that he had to bend nearly double to hold it, and had to fight with all his

strength to close it. And then, crouching, wary, with legs splayed, he seized the funnel-guy, swung on it as the ship gave a heavy lurch, half-slithered, half scrambled to the aft-deck ladder, tumbled down this with an expertness learned in half a hundred ships, and gained the shelter of the engine-room alleyway.

Standing in the entrance of the alleyway wrapped in an eiderscutum coat with a huge collar turned up against the cold wind was a drooping figure. Above the collar two dark eyes looked out like the eyes of a lost soul. Mr. Brindle could place neither the coat nor the eyes. Muttering an apology for having so nearly collided with her, he was about to pass on when she spoke, unbuttoned the collar to disclose the face of Ida Weiss.

Mr. Brindle was shocked at the sickly smile, at the suffering which had dulled the eyes and left the face a drawn, white mask.

"Why, miss," he said, "whatever are you doing here?"

She laughed; at least, she achieved a pathetic travesty of laughter.

"Is this a place where I shouldn't be? I've been wandering around, trying to find a spot where maybe it doesn't roll so much. I guess I'd have passed right out if I'd stayed in my room."

"But," urged Mr. Brindle, "you're ill, you ought not to be about."

"Sure I'm ill," agreed Ida. "If sea-sickness is being ill, then I'll tell the world I'm ill. And what's more, sailor, I just don't care whether I get better or not. I'd just like to lay right down and die."

Mr. Brindle hastily put out his arms to receive her as she swayed towards him. She came into them like a worn-out child in search of comfort. Stupefied at this turn of events, he held her to him, her head lolling on his shoulder. The wind yelled, the seas raced aft like claps of thunder, the ship, creaking and groaning, seemed to cry aloud, but Mr. Brindle, holding a girl in his arms, had entered into a

peace such as he had never known. She said:

"Can I stay like this a little while?"

"You don't have to ask me that, miss." He shot an anxious glance along the length of the alleyway, reflecting that he'd never hear the last of this if any of his messmates were to see him. And then, with the tendrils of black hair brushing his nose, he knew that he didn't care.

"You don't," said the weak voice into his shoulder, "have to go any place? I'm not keeping you?"

"Not at all, miss," he assured her. And, seeking to lighten her spirits: "Just you help yourself. Take a large basinful."

She quivered with laughter. "That's the first time I knew you had a sense of humour. And golly, how it hurts to laugh. Sick? I guess I've thrown up everything but my skin and bones."

"I know how you feel, miss. I've had some. Going across the Bay, years ago—the Bay of Biscay. I was only a kid. It was my first trip. We lost our upper-deck cargo, boats, everything. Yes, I know how you feel."

She leaned back against the bulkhead, shook the hair out of her eyes, achieved a haggard smile.

"Thanks a lot. I guess that's done me good. I believe I feel better."

"I could give you something for the sickness," muttered Mr. Brindle, with another sharp glance along the alleyway. "It's a remedy I got in Bombay. Some of these chaps out East—they're clever. I suppose——"

"Yes?"

"You wouldn't care to come into my cabin? You see, the stuff's very powerful, it's got to be measured out in drops, and——"

"Why wouldn't I care to come into your cabin? Snap out of it, sailor. Lead the way."

Mr. Brindle walked a few paces down the alleyway, piloted her through a door, and switched on the light. She saw a small round table with a red plush cloth, a curtained

corner which did duty as a wardrobe, a bunk, high up, with some drawers underneath it and Mr. Brindle's pyjamas neatly folded on top of a bright coverlet, Mr. Brindle's pipes teetering and nodding in a rack on the bulkhead, a row of shoes on a high shelf, shaving gear and toothbrush on a plate-glass shelf over the wash-basin, and a chest of drawers where he was now searching for the remedy. Periodically a heavy sea thumped against the porthole, the steering-engine near by gave voice incessantly with a grinding rattle, the cabin bucked and reeled like the floor of a haunted house at a fair, the main engines rumbled and growled below with a pertinacity that set everything vibrating. Ida Weiss, considering the bunk in conjunction with pandemonium, was astounded.

"Do you mean to tell me," she asked, "that you can sleep through all this?"

"I'm a fairly clever sleeper," he said, holding up the bottle to peer at its contents. "You get used to anything in time." And, surveying her pinched face: "You look pretty poorly. I should turn in if I were you when you've had this. It's a sedative."

"Ugh!" She pulled a wry face when she had drunk it. "I never had any luck with medicines."

Mr. Brindle sat down, and looked at her a little shyly. In all his years of going to sea he had never entertained a woman in his cabin before, and it occurred to him that he never would again. Now and then he stole glances at her shoes and stockings with the curious eye of a man who has never been on intimate terms with such delights, and he knew that her presence in his cabin had for ever changed it; that it would be for him, so long as he remained in the ship, a holy of holies, a place into which he could retire and recapture this scene just as it was now, with her hair black and gleaming against the camel-coloured coat, and the perfume of her sweet as rosemary in his nostrils. Suddenly he remembered, and rose from his chair.

"Oh! Excuse me. I just wanted——"

He opened one of the big drawers under his bunk, took out a round parcel of brown paper, cut the string, and unrolled before her the rug with the little fenced cottage, the neat trees.

"I'm afraid," he mumbled, "it's nothing very great. I mean, I'm not an artist. I just—er—pass the time, that's all."

"Mr. Brindle," said Ida, earnestly, "I think it's cute, it's dandy. And is this really for me?"

"With my best wishes," said Mr. Brindle.

"Thanks a lot. Thanks ever so much. Don't you tell me you're not an artist. You're a crackerjack, it sure does look a picture. Do you know what I'll do with it? These colours will tone fine with my bedroom. I shall put it down in front of my dressing-table, and every time I look at it—why, I guess I'll think of you, and the talks we had together, and the night we danced on deck."

Mr. Brindle blushed with pleasure, and for a moment or two he tried hard to imagine Ida Weiss in her bedroom, her feet on this very rug, brushing her hair, pausing perhaps to think of the *Aphrodite*, and the sailor who had vanished into the past. Three months, he thought, or four, and I shall see the last of her. Just a wave, a smile, and she'll be gone, and I shall be watch-keeping in other ships, in other places—Monte Video, Banjermassin, Hong Kong, Rotterdam. Solemnly, he stared at nothing in particular, with the nature of his thoughts heavy upon his face, until she suddenly broke in upon his reverie.

"Cheer up," she said. "It can't be as bad as all that. What were you thinking about?"

"Of the talks we've had together," he said, "and the night we danced. I shall never forget you."

And then Mr. Brindle hastily arose. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'm neglecting you. It isn't often I play the host."

He produced brandy, two glasses, a syphon.

"You must forgive the glasses. They're all I've got. Not at all suitable for a lady. Will you say when?"

She raised her glass. "It's been nice, a nice surprise. I didn't expect this." She looked around the cabin. Her eyes slowly took in Mr. Brindle's pyjamas, his pipes, the curtain swinging like a slow pendulum in the corner, the plush tablecloth, the row of shoes. Up on deck the ship's bell struck eleven.

"To us," she said, softly, "here in this cabin at eleven o'clock. I guess I'm glad I was seasick. I'll always remember it."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Bright Lights

1

THE SHIP THREW HERSELF ABOUT; she stood on her head, she sat on her stern; there were dreadful moments when, thrusting her nose into a cliff of water, she escaped only with immense effort with the seas streaming off her fo'c'sle and spouting from her scuppers. But Mr. Wix remained sublimely immune from alarm. Seated in the saloon with Kay French he viewed the encroachment of the Mediterranean into the corridor outside with the unconcern of a superman and from time to time replenished his glass from the bottle of whisky which, in the interests of safety, reposed in his coat pocket—he poured with a hand perfectly steady, raised the glass, gave her a look of infinite benevolence, and said:

"Happy days, my dear, very happy days to you." He drank, and mopped his brow, and leaned forward to pat her hand. "I think you're a wonderful person; nobody was ever more wonderful. You and I together, darling, riding the storm. I feel very proud of you, immensely proud. You're not drinking?"

"No, Wixy. I can't drink any more."

"Good girl. Quite right. O, thou invis—invisible spirit of wine, let us call thee devil."

For a long, long time he stared into her eyes, then leaned forward across the table, confidential.

"My dear, I'm worried about you. Are you all right? You don't want anything? Five hundred pounds? A thousand? Don't misunderstand me. A privilege. An honour and a privilege."

He fumbled in his inner pocket, produced a cheque-book. She thrust it away.

"All I want from you, Wixy, is that you should go to bed."

"Bed?" He shook his head. "Men die in bed. I'm disappointed in you, my dear. I——"

The door opened to let in Mr. Brindle.

"Beg pardon, miss," said Mr. Brindle, "but I happened to catch sight of you as I came past. There's a wireless message for Mr. French."

2

Kay French took it and read it with a sense of relief that it had not been handed to her brother. She must, she decided, act without consulting Mr. Wix; no longer did she feel willing to rely on his judgment; the personality with which she now had to deal was ruled by chance rather than reason, the sanity of yesterday had been sapped away and in its place there remained only an insatiable thirst, an idiot generosity, and a collection of witless words. There was only one reply to make to this message, and she made it. It ran:

Your message received. Sorry to be unable to help in any way.

HERBERT FRENCH.

She handed the pencilled words to Mr. Brindle. "Will you please send that at once?"

"Of course he will," said Mr. Wix. "Good chap, Brindle. Have a drink, old boy."

"You're very kind, sir, but if you'll excuse me——"

"Certainly not. Man doth not live by bread alone. I wouldn't excuse the King."

3

Captain Sale stood on the bridge and watched the jackstaff as it swung to starboard with the Port Said lighthouse on the end of the mole receding slowly astern.

"Ease your helm," he said. Then, after a pause: "Midships."

The helmsman spun the wheel. "Midships, sir. Helm's amidships."

The speed of the swing decreased. Ahead on the port side a big grey battleship lay at anchor with her booms out. Captain Sale said: "Send a man aft to dip the duster," and, after a pause: "Steady! Steady her on the Dutchman."

"Steady her on the Dutchman, sir."

The helmsman checked the swing, eased the helm with the jackstaff dead on the Dutch liner ahead. As they passed the battleship the white ensign was dipped in reply to their own salute. Captain Sale moved the pointer of the engine-room telegraph from *Half Speed* to *Slow*, gazed out of the bridge window at Mr. Brindle waiting on the fo'c'slehead, then lifted his eyes to the Dutch flag and the two smokestacks wide as tunnels and taller than houses. With his eyes he watched one thing and with his mind he watched many others. He saw the harbour full of shipping, he recognized at a glance Swedes, Danes, Dutchmen, Italians, Frenchmen, Turks, Japs, Germans by the colours of their flags. He saw the tall white hats of chefs leaning over the rails of floating hotels, the faces of stewards framed in the portholes of pantries, the faces of Slavs, Nordics, Chinese, in dozens, in scores, all different, all the same in that indefinable look which sailors get from the sea. And whilst

he took note of these things with his physical eyes his inner eye dwelt fondly on Sadie's shoes standing in a row under the dressing-chest, on silver-backed hairbrushes, the cut-glass scent-spray which he himself had given her, on pots of cream, lipstick, all the exciting, intimate paraphernalia of a woman's toilet. He saw his own slippers by the fireplace in the sitting-room, his dressing-gown hanging behind the bedroom door, his shaving tackle in the bathroom—symbols of home, conjugal bliss, shirt-sleeved contentment, and the thought struck him that he had done very well for himself in one place and another—a wife in every port, so to speak, and nothing to pay beyond the usual expenses of entertainment; for Sadie, and Madeleine, and the others were not professional ladies to be had for the asking; they were women who worked for their livings and liked a bit of fun on the side. They loved him for himself alone, his twinkling blue eyes, his bald head, his smooth baby face, his engaging personality. And Sadie would be waiting for him on the waterfront; she'd be dressed to kill; elegant shoes, stockings trim and taut, one of those flowered silk frocks that swayed and flared as she turned in supple swiftness with silken shoulder-straps showing through its transparency. Home, home is the sailor, home from the sea.

Suddenly, he let out a yell: "Let go!"

With a splash, a rattle of cable, the anchor went over the side. Captain Sale rang down *Full Astern*. He thought: It's a grand life, a cushy life.

4

Mr. Wix had slept well. New from the bath, he looked fresh as a daisy, for his sleep had carried him through most of the day and he had risen at six p.m. to find the ship approaching Port Said. But not yet was he to become normal. He had again refused food. And, of course, the rest of the passengers talked amongst themselves in staggered amazement. For ninety-six hours he had not eaten;

he had sustained himself with whisky, he had rung the changes with gin, brandy, champagne. That he should face each new day with a brisk jauntiness and his pink complexion unimpaired; that he should walk the decks with firmness and vigour—these were matters to make them gape.

And now Kay French and her brother stood with him by the accommodation ladder waiting for the motor-boat to be lowered. Her vivacity had gone, her expression was troubled, anxious; now and again as she glanced at Mr. Wix it turned to sadness. As for Herbert French, he was strung up, it was difficult for him to stand still, to refrain from biting his nails. It had come upon him during these last days that Mr. Wix in his cups was not to be trusted, and he had no confidence that his parcel would ever arrive at the Port Said aerodrome. And the parcel was in Mr. Wix's hands. Unsuccessfully, both Kay French and Herbert had attempted to relieve him of it. On the last occasion he had turned on Herbert with a display of temper that was frightening.

"Will you be quiet, sir?"

Sudden fury had looked out of the brown eyes, the words had cracked like a whiplash. In a flash, it had passed, and Mr. Wix was smiling again, but the ugliness of that moment wasn't to be easily forgotten.

They piled into the motor-boat, which settled considerably in the water as it received the weight of Mrs. Weiss. Mr. Puckle, stealing furtive glances at Mr. Wix in the gathering dusk, felt the itch of desire, of excitement. Outlined under Mr. Wix's tussore coat was the bulge of a fat wallet, and he could not forget that its owner was again in that state of fuddled happiness which turned five-pound notes into so much trash. He cursed himself for a bungler. No chances for such as he now. He had blown the gaff and put that big bastard wise to the time of day.

The seaman in charge of the boat let in the clutch; in a wide, curving sweep they left the ship behind. Every-

body was chattering and laughing nineteen to the dozen, everybody was in the highest spirits. Mr. Puckle said to Ada Letts: "It's a one-horse burg, I'll tell the world Port Said's lousy. When you've seen the Suez Canal Company's offices and the military barracks you're through. And talk about Malta, miss—well, you ain't smelt nothing yet."

Mr. Wix stood upon the jetty as if he owned it, put up a lordly hand for a taxi, lowered himself like a falling monument into the seat between Kay French and Herbert, put a hand on her knee.

"Everything all right, my dear? You're quite happy?"

"It's difficult to be happy, Wixy."

The street lights flashed on ahead of them, coloured lamps spelled out the names of Bass and Worthington, the glare of neons advertised a cinema, the windows of the saloons beckoned with brilliance.

"Where are we going?" she asked. The taxi fled along the street, hooting with its klaxon. A variety of fascinating people rushed swiftly past the window; gorgeous Arabs in white turbans embroidered with gold, men black as charcoal with teeth white as tapioca dressed in barbaric colours and topped with a tarboosh of red, blue-tasselled; bearded men from the desert wearing the burnous; black men, yellow men, men with brown, olive, copper-coloured skins. She looked at Herbert, tense, pale, apprehensive. She thought: "If only everything was all right. I could have enjoyed this."

"We're going," said Mr. Wix, "to make whoopee. The dancings, the cabaret, that's what the fellow said—eh, Herbert? Cheer up, old boy, cheer up. Time flies. It's gone, by God, before you can lay hands on it. To-morrow we die. Laugh, damn your eyes, laugh!"

Herbert French gasped as a heavy fist dug him in the ribs. Mr. Wix suddenly shook with merriment, desisted as her hand gripped his wrist.

"But, Wixy. Listen to me. We've got to see Mr. Sefton at the aerodrome."

"Darling," he murmured. "I've got everything under control. Leave it to me. I've promised to see your brother through. Sacred duty. You understand? My life-blood, if nec—necessary."

Abruptly, the taxi swerved in to the kerb, braked, pulled up. Through a wide window she saw a sea of dancers, packed tight, scores of tables with orange-shaded lights, a wall which was one vast mirror. Mr. Wix got down.

"How much?"

"Five shilling, sir."

He gave the driver a pound, waved him away.

5

Mr. Wix was telephoning.

"Hullo? That the aerodrome? Good. Will you put me on to Mr. Sefton?"

He held the line. How long ago since he had seen Sefton? Good God, it must be thirty years. Kids together, same street, same school. Would he remember?

"Hullo?"

"Hullo. That Jim Sefton?"

"That's right. Who is it speaking, please?"

Mr. Wix chuckled. "Remember Johnny Wix? Remember the time we broke the Jubilee lamp in Tidbury Square?"

"Johnny Wix! Well, I'll be damned. Tidbury Square. You make me feel—say, how are you? Where are you speaking from?"

"Blue Danube saloon. How are you, you old rascal? Remember——"

"Look here—how long are you staying? Have you come in on one of the liners?"

"No, old boy. Private yacht. Due out in two days."

"Um. That's torn things. I'm leaving right now for Cairo—well, in another five minutes. The plane's ticking

over now. You can't possibly make it from the Blue Danube. Of all the putrid——"

"Listen," cut in Mr. Wix. "Sorry to interrupt, but I wanted to know . . ."

He stated his case, hung up, rejoined Kay French and Herbert at their table.

"Sefton," he said, "is leaving for Cairo in five minutes. I'm sorry about that, sweetheart. I could have taken you out there, he'd have given us a good time. About the parcel. It's O.K. He's left instructions at his office. The plane for England leaves at eight o'clock to-morrow morning. So now, Herbert old boy, all your troubles are over. I think that calls for a drink. Champagne. Wine that maketh glad the heart of man."

Mr. Wix looked from one to the other. They were both staring at him, Kay French in blank dismay, Herbert at the last pitch of alarm. And now the girl found her tongue.

"The parcel," she said. "Where is it?"

In an instant, Mr. Wix was on his feet, shocked into griminess. For a man of his size and weight he moved with amazing speed. His eyes on the telephone box, he cut straight through the packed mass of dancers with the impassibility of a tank, scattering indignant couples right and left. Kay French, who had stood up to watch him, gave a cry. And suddenly, Mr. Wix broke into a run, with the man who had just left the telephone haring it for the door, parcel in hand.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Shock for Albert Sims

I

TOGETHER WITH HIS ASSISTANT, Jim Barwood, Albert Sims stepped on to the jetty.

"Well, here you are, o' man," he said, "here it is, the gateway to the East, as they say, and a bloody fine gateway it is, I must say. No kidding, it's a sink, old Barwood, a sink of corruption. Mucky postcards, and exhibitions of you-know-what, and special cinema shows that 'ud fair make yer eyes pop—curl yer hair, they would, I give yer *my* word. Well, you ain't going in for none of that. Once you git yer morals up-ended there's no knowing where you'll clew up. You got to keep yer nose clean, see, o' man. I dunno what your governor would say if I was to lead you adrift, you being a band of hope student and all. So what I'm going to do is to drop you at the Y.M.C.A., got me? You can amuse yerself for hours there—darts, and billiards, and ping-pong, and dominoes, and God knows what-all. And don't you budge out o' there, neether. Once you git loose on the street and these dagoes git hold of you—well, they won't leave you a shirt to cover your birthday present with. Now I warn yer! "

They strode on. Jim Barwood, wide-eyed with wonder, gaped at the bright colours and the dark skins. Once or twice the steward repelled the attacks of the postcard vendors with fierce words and threatening gestures. For long periods he was silent under a heavy weight of regrets, a burden of disappointment, for he had seen the owner open his safe and hand out the parcel to Mr. Wix. "You might have known it, old Sims," he said to himself, "you was a bloody fool ever to have thought otherwise. Fortunes ain't so easily picked up as all that. And where do we go next? Another ship, o' man, another steward's billet, ten pound a month and all found until they put you ashore for keeps. Cor, what a life, eh? "

Albert Sims strode on. By the time they drew abreast of the Y.M.C.A. he had surrendered his dream; his vision of a nice little cottage and a superior wife had much engaged him these last few days; rapt moments in the pantry had seen the building of a green-house, the construction of a rockery, the mulching of standard roses, the

buying of the pram. Gone, all gone. All at once he felt savage, as if he could wring somebody's neck.

"Put yer cap on straight," he snarled at Jim Barwood. "What d'yer think you are—some mucking shopwalker on a Bank holiday?"

2

Having seen Jim Barwood into the Y.M.C.A. the steward stood on the steps and considered where next to make for, and finally, making for nowhere in particular, he idled disconsolately along Market Street until at last, turning a corner, he saw ahead the lights of the Blue Danube. He knew what he would get in there: tepid bottled beer at an extortionate price; mirrors, and coloured lights, and the spectacle of exclusive tarts dancing with overfed Europeans. As an alternative there were the brothels with their dark-skinned pimps, the aphrodisiac of the "private" cinemas with their steep admission fees, or the boredom of Port Said's streets.

"Oh, what the hell!" he muttered. "You got to do something, o' man, you can't just walk the pavements like a wet week."

So, with decision in his footsteps, he headed for the Blue Danube.

Opposite the saloon, he was just about to cross the road when there burst forth from the door a swarthy-looking man. Dressed in European clothes he looked like what he was, a denizen of one of Port Said's dark alleyways, a sneak-thief who waited on opportunity with a pair of swift feet and ready hands. It was surprising to see this bandit pop out of the door like a jack-in-the-box, and the steward, taken aback, stood irresolute. The next moment, tense with the exit of Mr. Wix, was more surprising still. Albert Sims paused for one moment to eye the seething crowd behind the door, and was then galvanized into action. The swarthy man was showing a remarkable turn of speed; he was a past master at the grab-and-run technique; he was

long, and lean, and he covered the ground like a greyhound. But not even a greyhound could have escaped Mr. Wix, who ran like a man possessed. He wasn't merely running for his life, he ran to keep his pact with a lady. Albert Sims, a bad third, followed in their wake; he was entirely outclassed, a moderate selling plater led by Derby winners.

Mr. Wix, emerging from the saloon, had raised a cry, and at intervals, careering down the somewhat crowded pavement, he found breath to shout: "Stop him! Stop that man!" Until finally a British tar, directly in the path of the runaway, saw Mr. Wix in pursuit, sized up the situation at a glance, and put out a foot. The man went down heavily, the parcel flew from his hands, was retrieved by Mr. Wix—and all might have been well had he left it at that. But Mr. Wix was aroused, and thirsting for vengeance. Seeing the thief break away in the confusion he made a dive across the street in pursuit, heard a yell of warning, heard the far-away sound of a crash, of voices growing fainter and fainter until they receded altogether in the blackness which closed down on him like a slammed door. The driver jumped down from his taxi; he and others picked Mr. Wix up, laid him on the kerb, and helplessly stared at the unconscious victim of accident. Albert Sims pushed his way through the gapers.

"Gangway there, give a gangway," he said. "I know him, see? He's one of my passengers."

Mr. Wix presently opened his eyes.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "Where's my drink? Eh?" With an effort he sat up. A policeman began to shove at the crowd. "Come along, move on, give him air." Expertly, he felt Mr. Wix. "You're all right, sir—nothing broken."

"Good," said Mr. Wix. He blinked. "Houses going round," he explained.

And then, as he closed his eyes again, Kay French stooped and secured the parcel.

"That's all right, steward," she said. "I'll look after him. Will you do me a great favour?"

"Anything, madam, anything at all," said Albert Sims.

"Thank you so much. Will you take this to Mr. Sefton's office at the aerodrome? Tell them that it's from Mr. Wix. And will you get a receipt for it?"

For a moment or two Albert Sims stared stupidly at the brown paper bespattered with sealing-wax. His wildest flights of fancy had never included luck like this. He pulled himself together.

"Certainly, madam," he said. "I'll do it at once."

3

He melted away into the crowd like mist before a breeze, clutching the parcel to him, bemused, his heart jumping like a jack-rabbit, his mind singing hosannas, telling him the good news. *Blind old Riley, you've got luck in both hands, you're lousy with it, you're a flaming millionaire.* A doorway impended with three steps. Happy as a school-boy fresh from a rich uncle he sat down on the topmost step, oblivious of the pulsing street, withdrawn, travelling along the private road of his own thoughts. *A receipt, o' man. That means you got to fake another parcel. What was the name?—Sefton. Wix must have phoned him; you don't know but what he told him this parcel was all sealed down; you got to get sealing-wax. Three thousand quid. Cor!—talk about jam on both sides, it don't seem real, it don't seem natural. They won't see your backside for dust, me old flower, once you got it safely banked away.*

He arose, moved off with purpose in his stride, making for the shopping quarter, for Azzopardi's Bazaar where one might buy anything from a carpet to a pennorth of brass nails. In the window he saw exactly what he wanted—books of Port Said views about six inches by four by half an inch thick. He bought half a dozen of these, together with brown paper, string, sealing-wax, and borrowing the

salesman's fountain-pen made up his parcel on the counter, sealed the knots, addressed it. A regiment of soldiers from the garrison turned into the street as he came out of the bazaar, headed by a band playing *Colonel Bogey*, and the music suddenly lifting him up, he stepped out, cocking a chest, feeling in very fine fettle, thinking good old England, Rule Britannia, hooray for the British Empire and Albert Sims. And then: Coo, what's the matter with you walking? Just you hump your carcase into a taxi.

4

Never had Port Said looked so good to Albert Sims as he drove out to the airfield; he gazed on the natives with affection, he even viewed the barracks with a fond eye; his new role as darling of the Fates inclined him to sympathy with Port Said's beggars, to an infinite benevolence for all humanity.

And when, on his return journey, he entered the Y.M.C.A. to pick up Jim Barwood, he was in the greatest good humour.

"Well, Barwood, o' man, how're you bin doing? Everything O.K.? Wait here, will you? Shan't be long."

He let himself into the lavatory, locked the door behind him. His intention was to conceal the miniatures about his person.

He cut the string. And then, staring in unbelief, the light went out of his eyes, his face puckered with disappointment like a child's.

"By God! " he muttered. "Puckle! "

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Home From the Sea

1

THE TAXI MOVED OFF. Captain Sale, his baby face beaming with delight, pulled her into his arms, gave her a long hug, the kiss of a hungry sailor.

"The same old Sadie," he said, "smart as new paint, shipshape as a Bristol clipper. You're wearing a new perfume, aren't you?"

"Cleopatra," said Sadie. "Do you like it?"

"It smells good to me," said the Captain. "Cleopatra. Wasn't she a bit of a goer?"

"She bathed," Sadie informed him, "in milk. Very exclusive, according to all accounts. You haven't altered, you old coot. And you still use hair tonic for that bald head of yours—I got a whiff of it just now. And you're looking very fit."

"Full of beans, bursting with energy. I'm just about fettle-up, old girl." His eyes, twinkling with mischief, dwelt on her red curls, her milky throat, the dimple in her cheek, her nose too *retroussé*, too broad. "It's been a long wait," he said. "I could just about eat you."

She giggled. "It looks as if we're going to be busy."

The taxi turned off the jetty into a busy street. Captain Sale saluted an acquaintance. Sadie, looking at him, felt the pride of possession; he looked very impressive in white drill with his powerful build; the larkish juvenility of his features was contradicted by the forthright jaw, the firm mouth; by the hands covered with a mat of hair, capable, thick, and strong. Of all the sailors she had met he stood out as the beau-ideal of a sea captain.

"Well," he said, "how have you been getting on? Selling Bibles, you said, in your letter." He chuckled. "That's rich. Does it pay you? Everything all right?"

You're looking prosperous, anyway. By gosh, yes—you wouldn't disgrace a king, Sadie."

"I don't sell the Bibles," she informed him, "I'm just the stenographer. No, it doesn't pay. You know my expensive tastes. I just make out. And the prosperous look is all my own work. Didn't you know I was a crackerjack with a needle?"

"I'd never have believed it. You look as if you'd been turned out by Paris. Where are we going? Home?"

"I've got a meal ready for you. Lobster salad, fried chicken, iced pudding, a bottle of Chablis. Afterwards I thought we'd go out and dance. Or do you want to be domestic in slippers?" She snuggled up to him, laid the whole length of her body beside his, squeezed his arm. "Gee, but it's nice to have you back, you old catamaran, I feel like I could just jump over the moon."

"That's the ticket," said the Captain. "Lobster salad, a bottle of Chablis. Bless you, Sadie. You're damned good to me. If I was the marrying sort——"

"Don't make me laugh. And it's much better this way. You and I were made for honeymoons, not marriages. And you don't have to thank me for anything, baby-face. I'm one of those women who must be loved, and I knew you'd make love beautifully before ever you spoke to me."

"Two minds," agreed Captain Sale, "with but a single thought. The same thing occurred to me when I first set eyes on you before ever I saw your face."

"Did it? You never told me that before."

"What I saw at first," went on Captain Sale, "was your back. You were dancing, and I got a kick, one whale of a thrill. There was something about the way you moved, something that just got me. I'm not much of a hand at explaining. You've never seen one of the old clipper ships moving in a fair wind, have you, Sadie? If you had you'd know what I mean. They had something of what you've got."

"I think I get you, Steve."

"They were tall, and tapering. They had narrow waists and pretty quarters."

"You should know, Captain. Tall, and tapering, with narrow waists and pretty quarters. But suppose my face had been the ugliest ever with a long beard and what-have-you?"

"Why suppose? It couldn't have been. And, anyway, they can fix moustaches and beards. Where are we going? This isn't the way to——"

"He's got to make a detour," Sadie explained. "They've got the road up."

2

She closed the door behind them. Under the dim light of the pilot-lamp he held her to him like a monk newly escaped from the cloisters whilst he kissed her lips, her closed eyes, caressed the lobe of her ear with his teeth. The hall had greeted him with a smell of floor polish as the clean sheets would later on fold him over with the scent of lavender. Opening the door of the sitting-room she pushed him inside whilst she went off to prepare the dinner, and he looked at his chair by the fireside with the eye of a man receiving a welcome from an old friend. His chair, his pipes in the rack on the smoker's table, his slippers in the box of the club fender, his own particular books by Conrad and McFee in the shelves to the right of the mantel. Captain Sale sat down with a sigh of contentment and entered into domestic bliss with all his senses sharpened to receive and to respond.

He sat there and luxuriated in the sight of Sadie Singert bustling in and out of the room; for this was all he wanted, to watch her movements, to stamp them on his memory so that they might be repeated in years to come for his entertainment when he stood on the bridges of other ships on dark nights in some ocean at the other end of the world.

"Well," she said at last, "here it is, Johnny blue-eyes. Come and eat."

Whilst they ate, she plied him with questions. One knew where her heart was by the pictures on the walls of rural scenes, of farmhouses, country lanes, timbered country which couldn't be repeated anywhere else in the world, a field of corn which glowed like newly minted gold under an English sun. Though her father was American, her mother had been born and had lived in England all her life, and Sadie's childhood had been spent on a Suffolk farm.

"Were you in Suffolk lately?" she asked him. "No?" Her breasts rose and fell as she sighed. "Suffolk," she said, low, "in the summer-time. I know what it looks like. I've never forgotten the rows of stooks standing up like soldiers, and the little hills, and anyway, I've got the pictures to remind me. But it's the smell that I miss. Corn, and cows, and fold-yards, and the smell of honeysuckle when the sun's gone down mixed up with the river smell and a whiff of fried fish as somebody carries it home to supper. Salad O.K.?"

"Grand." He stared with some surprise at a single tear bright as a crystal bead on her cheek. Very quietly, without fuss, without any distortion of her features, she was weeping. He hadn't seen her in this mood before. Very wisely, he said nothing about it, and returned his glance to his plate.

"Twenty years is a long time to stay away from your own place," she said. "Every year I promise myself I'll go back."

"Why not?"

"I guess I just don't go, that's all. My fault. If I liked, I could save. But if I saved I wouldn't be able to go places, I wouldn't be able to dress. I like to dress well, baby-face. I like you to be proud of me."

"Proud?" Captain Sale was touched. "I couldn't begin to tell you how proud I am."

"More salad?" She gave him a dazzling smile. Her washed eyes glittered like chips of ice.

"No more, thanks. I'll try the chicken."

"I guess I could have made something of myself too, if it wasn't for the other thing. I could have had an executive job. Do you know there's a woman here managing a British concern at a thousand a year? I could eat her job before breakfast."

"What other thing?" asked the Captain, curious.

"This," she said. "Having a man to welcome home. People talk. It gets you in bad with the boss. I guess I'll be looking for another job soon. Well, I won't worry. I've never sold anything except my talents."

She helped him to pudding. It was delicious. She could cook, sew and entertain. What more did a man want save the surety of heaven hereafter? Captain Sale drained his glass, wiped his mouth with the linen napkin.

She arose. "In two minutes," she promised. "I'll be ready. You'd like to wash?"

3

They danced at a little place that Sadie knew of. It was quiet, select, with a discreet orchestra, dimmed lights, soft-footed waiters, a mere mutter of conversation. Captain Sale looked unexpectedly distinguished in a dinner-suit, and as for Sadie, starry-eyed with a gown of paillettes, she was ravishment itself. The Captain, as always, held himself stiffly erect, moving from the hips down, like a dancing monument, looking down into her eyes as if bewitched by the richness of his prize. However, his monumental carriage proved a triumph in the tango which, since they were the only two who attempted it, turned out to be in the nature of an exhibition dance. They moved like two inspired automatons; both of them rising to the occasion, they gave an electrifying display, from which Captain Sale hastily retired on finding that they had provoked applause.

"Gin and lime?" he suggested.

"Please, Johnny," she said. Her eyes smiled upon him,

languorous, alight with mischief, playful as squirrels. "You look like a big business magnate, very important and expensive. What sort of man's your boss, by the way?"

"A white man," said the Captain. "A toff, absolutely."

"And the others?"

"Oh, very nice. A mixed crowd, but very nice, very interesting. There's Mr. Wix. Big bloke. I *mean* big—I'll bet he could give me two or three stones. And drink? Chicken, you never saw anything like it. I can put away a basinful, as you know. But this man—well, it isn't drinking, it's genius. *And* stone sober at the end of the session." Captain Sale shook his head. "Amazing. Of course he's a freak. Hollow legs. Nice chap. You'd like him. Pink skin like a strawberry ice, crinkly white hair, handsome as a fine day."

He clinked his glass with hers. "My love to you, Sadiekins. You're a sight for sore eyes in that frock."

"To your blue eyes," murmured Sadie. "Bless them. Did you know blue was my favourite colour?"

But the Captain didn't hear. His attention was focused on Mr. Puckle and Ada Letts, who had just come in through the swing doors. They exchanged smiles and waves.

"Two of our people," he explained. "What do you think of the man, Sadie?"

"He's got very sharp eyes," she said.

"And itching fingers," supplied Captain Sale. "My steward knew him on the P. & O. liners. He spoke to me about him, it seems he was a card-sharper."

"What did you do about it. Tell the owner?"

"Whew!—no. It wouldn't do. I might get told to mind my own business. It isn't my pidgin. But . . . there's something going on, something underneath between Puckle and Mr. Wix. We stopped the ship to bathe one day. I happened to be watching those two through my glasses."

Captain Sale went on to tell Sadie what he had seen.

"Puckle was scared stiff—I could see his face pretty

clearly. Old Wix had grabbed him by the hair—grim earnest, no playfulness about it. He shoved him down, held him under. I tell you, Sadie, it was a close call for Puckle. All in he was—Wix had to tow him back. By God, yes, a close call, I'll bet old Wix was shaking in his shoes. And what's funny about it is this: Puckle never said a word, never made any complaint. Yes, there's some jiggery-pokery going on there. What say? Shall we have this dance?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Private and Confidential

1

MR. PUCKLE, in transit through the Suez Canal, stared at the desert and mopped his face.

"Say," he complained, "I'll tell the world it's hot—hot as hell, hotter than ever I remember it in these parts. What say, Lady Eleanor—don't you feel all burnt up?"

"I'm practising auto-suggestion, Mr. Puckle," said Lady Eleanor. "Every moment I'm getting cooler and cooler."

"I should have thought," mused Mr. Puckle, "that was just hooley. Don't tell me that it works?"

"Not noticeably," admitted Lady Eleanor, "but you must give the thing a fair trial. I'm persevering."

Ada Letts fanned herself vainly with a newspaper. "It's unreasonable," she said. "I feel like a cinder. I'm sure I shall begin to smoke presently. What is it when you burst into flames? Spontaneous combustion?"

Kay French stole a glance at Mr. Wix. His long eyelashes made two crescents on his pink cheeks; he seemed to be asleep. Moreover, he had that morning, to her immense relief, taken breakfast; his experience ashore in Port Said had unexpectedly knocked out of him all convivial

intentions. Sober and in his right mind he found himself weary, depressed, and full of vain regrets.

"My dear," he had said to her, "I'm dreadfully sorry. Can you forgive me?"

"There's nothing to forgive, Wixy. It's pathological with you. One can't forgive a man for being ill."

Mr. Puckle arose. "I guess I'll go down to my cabin," he announced, "and switch on the fan. Yes, I guess I'll lay down on my bunk and practise that auto-thing of yours, Ladyship—every moment it's snowing harder."

2

In the steward's pantry was a padded seat about six feet long, upon which, in drill trousers and vest, Albert Sims was stretched at ease with the electric fan lodged on a chair by his head. He was lying on his side with a cushion for a pillow. In this position he could easily observe Jim Barwood's activities, which were at the moment concerned with the cleaning of silver. He was doing this with a small brush and Goddard's plate powder, his face puckered with concentration, his tongue clenched tightly between his lips, whilst Albert Sims, sardonic on his couch, discouraged the novice with acid comment.

"Frame yerself, o' man, frame yerself. Moisten yer brush and dip it in the powder—moisten it, I said, not drown it. Of all the cack-handed clients I ever seen, you take the blinking bath-bun. You oughter be a fireman, not a pantry-boy. Gumption and elbow-grease, that's what does it. Cor save old England, what's the matter with you? Strike me pink, you ain't the village idiot. Or are you?"

Jim Barwood wiped the sweat out of his eyes with his forearm.

"I'm doin' me best, steward," he mumbled. "You can't aspect me to learn all at once. And you watchin', it makes me nervous. I reckon I'd do it better if you wasn't watchin', Mr. Sims."

Albert Sims was suddenly alert. Down the corridor he had heard the click of a door-hook. A moment later the bell rang, and his eye flew to the indicator.

"Number five," he muttered. "That's Puckle."

Swiftly he got into a polo shirt, donned his white coat. In a moment or two he was back, pouring out gin and ginger-beer.

"Give us the cracked ice out o' the frig," he said. "Move yerself, o' man. Quick's the word!"

His eyes were sober as he moved down the corridor, his mouth firm, a little grim. He passed inside to Mr. Puckle, handed him the drink. And then, stepping back, he dropped the hook of the door, closed it, set his tray down on the chair.

"Hey!" Mr. Puckle moved irritably on his bunk. "Don't do that, for Mike's sake. Air, buddy, air. This place is an oven. Open her up."

"I—er—I got something to say to you, sir. Something private."

There was something so peculiar in the steward's tone that Mr. Puckle sat up.

"Eh? Private? Shoot, buddy. Go right ahead."

"You don't reckernize me, do you, sir?" ventured Albert Sims.

Mr. Puckle stared hard, slowly shook his head. "Search me," he said.

"Not on the P. & O. boats? Well, I know you all right."

By this time the steward's tone was unmistakably not respectful. An unpleasant light came into Mr. Puckle's eyes.

"Say," he said, rather nastily, "what's biting you? What makes you think you can get saucy with me?"

Albert Sims stared into the hard eyes and hardened his own to cope with them.

"I'm not getting saucy," he said. "It's just a matter of business, it's about a parcel."

For a long time Mr. Puckle was silent; even Albert Sims,

who was not very sensitive, knew that it was an evil silence. Then:

"O.K.," breathed Mr. Puckle, "it's about a parcel. Come across, buddy. I'll see your hand."

"Belonging," said the steward, "to Mr. French. Pictures, as a matter o' fact. Minichoor's."

Murder looked out of Mr. Puckle's face. He was sitting up on the bunk with his hands gripping the side of it, and for a moment the steward thought he was going to leap.

"By God!" he said, "you been busy, ain't you? Busy as a rat in a barrel."

"Come to that," Albert Sims reminded him, "so have you."

"You two-timing bastard!" spat Mr. Puckle. "Know what I'd do with you if——"

"No good talking like that," put in the other. "I got you all tied up, see? No good to get the needle about it. Best to be sensible."

"All right. Let's have the dope."

"It was the night we berthed in Port Said," went on the steward. "Some dago half-inched the parcel from Mr. Wix. Ran out of the Blue Danube, he did, with Mr. Wix chasing him. Mr. Wix was hurt, run down by a taxi, and Miss French asked me if I'd take the parcel to the office at the aerodrome and get a receipt for it."

Albert Sims paused. He had never committed a crime in his life before, and to confess himself now, even to Mr. Puckle, was difficult. For a moment or two he sought for a way round. But he had none of that ingenious glibness which is the property of finished liars, and he was forced to go ahead.

"Well," he said, "I knew what was in that parcel—what was supposed to be in it, anyways."

"How did you know that?"

"That," said the steward, "is neether here nor there. I opened it. I didn't find no pictures, not by long chalks. Plywood, that's what it was."

"You're trying to pin that on me?"

"No, not trying," said the steward, gently. "I have pinned it on you. You see, Mr. Puckle, I was in the shop at Gib when you came in for plywood."

3

Mr. Puckle felt thirsty after that. He lifted the glass of gin and ginger-beer, swallowed the contents at a gulp, and gave Albert Sims the cold glance of a vulture. By God, he thought, who'd have believed it, a little runt of a steward having the nerve to muscle in like this. He itched in every pore to lay hands on him, give him the half-Nelson, twist his arm till it cracked, break his rabbit-neck. He said:

"Yes, you've sure been busy. Anything else?"

"About Bombay?" suggested the steward, gaining in complacency. "Chung Soo is the name, I think, and three thousand pounds is the price. It's a lot of money."

"You know all the answers," rasped Mr. Puckle.

"I've been lucky."

"Luck? That ain't luck—it's an act of God. What do you want?"

"Halves," said Albert Sims.

"All right. You win."

"Not yet," said Albert Sims with a faint smile. "As I said, it's a lot of money. You might get drunk and miss the ship at Bombay. Or anything. We'll do this on a business footing, Mr. Puckle. Safeguards, see? You give me, say, half the pictures. He'd naturally want the whole set, wouldn't he? And when we tie up at Bombay we can arrange to meet at Chung Soo's and cash in."

Mr. Puckle said: "You might try this with the wrong guy one of these days. I guess I wouldn't make a practise of it if I was you, buddy. It ain't good for the health. You ain't itching to die young, are you?"

"I don't," said the steward, "make a practise of anything like this. It was just a bit of good fortune."

He picked up his tray. With it he assumed the role of the efficient steward once more.

"Can I get you anything else, sir?"

"Yes," said Mr. Puckle. "You can get the hell out of this. Scram!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Last Will

1

MRS. WEISS was conscious of an uneasy feeling in the pit of her stomach. All the evening Dunne had sat apart with Lady Eleanor. They talked in low tones. Strain her ears as she would, Mrs. Weiss failed to catch a word. From time to time, swivelling a jealous eye, she saw on their faces the kind of expression which betokens an intimacy of communion; she read fondness into their smiles, tenderness into their lingering glances. At last, unable to bear the sight any longer, she arose and went to her cabin.

Her hopes of an "arrangement" were fast vanishing. Ida, she thought, would surely have told her if Dunne had said anything. Or would she? Mrs. Weiss heaved a sigh as she sat down. Ida grew increasingly disobliging. One would think that she might at least lay herself out to attract Dunne's interest. But no; she deliberately flouted her mother's dearest wish; here she was treating the chance of a lifetime as if it were of no account. Mrs. Weiss looked into her mirror. She saw a large area of flushed face, eyes bright with indignant tears, as yet unshed.

She opened a drawer in her dressing-chest, began to turn over its contents. She was looking for a letter, received at Port Said, which she wanted to re-read. Having vainly searched one drawer she tried the others, with a like result. Thus eluding her, the letter became a matter of desperate importance; Mrs. Weiss began to grow feverish; she scraped

and scrambled, shook things out, tossed them hither and thither ever more viciously as she thought of Ida's ingratitude, her mulishness, her rudeness. And at last, with a final look in her bag, she hurled it from her and rang the bell.

"Oh, steward," she said, when Albert Sims appeared, "will you ask Miss Weiss if she'll speak to me?"

2

"Hey there, momma," said Ida, closing the door. "What's cooking?"

She looked at the disarray of garments on the bunk, on the floor, on the chair.

"Lost something?"

"Yes, Ida. That letter from Mrs. Leaner. I gave it to you to read."

"Sure you did," agreed Ida, "and I gave it back."

"That's what I thought. And I'm positive I put it in the top left drawer."

"Is it all that important?" asked Ida.

"Certainly it's important. I hadn't read it properly. Of course nothing's important to you, not even—huh—your momma's happiness."

Mrs. Weiss wiped away a tear. Ida regarded her with an ironical smile.

"No scenes, Mrs. Weiss dear," she said. "If you turn on the waterworks I'll leave you flat."

The mother blew her nose. "I do wish things could be different, Ida. You don't confide in me at all. I used to tell my mother everything."

"What do you want me to tell you?"

"Well—huh—the little intimate things that a mother likes to hear from her daughter. I could give you a lot of—of love, and sympathy, if you'd only open your heart to me, Ida."

Ida lit a cigarette. "I wouldn't get Mr. Dunne on my

mind too much, if I were you, mamma. Snap out of it. All this boloney about opening my heart just gives me one big laugh. About this letter. It might have fallen down behind the drawers. Have you had them out? "

"No."

Taking out the top drawer Ida saw a space behind it of two or three inches. The letter, if anywhere, she decided, would have fallen down to the bottom. Having got the bottom drawer out she stooped and peered within. Not one envelope, but two. The other was long, and thick, sealed at the back, and bearing the superscription: *John Withers. Last Will and Testament.* She handed it over to her mother.

"You'd better give that to Mr. Dunne, mamma dear. Wasn't John Withers the guy who left him this yacht? "

"Sir John Withers," corrected Mrs. Weiss. "Thank you, Ida, for finding my letter. I'll give this to Mr. Dunne at once."

She arose, was suddenly motionless as an idea illuminated her brain like a flash of lightning. Out of her eye corner she could see Ida's back turned to her as she returned the drawer to its place. With some difficulty she controlled her voice.

"Ida. Do be a dear. I'd be so glad if you'd put all those things back for me."

"Sure I will. About Sir John. I seem to remember that he died on this yacht. I guess I read in some newspaper that he died suddenly, on a cruise."

"Yes, that's right, dear."

"In that bed maybe? "

"I wouldn't know that, Ida."

"Anyway, his body would lay there."

"I suppose it did."

Ida shuddered as she glanced at the bunk. "You're welcome, Mrs. Weiss dear, very welcome. I wouldn't sleep in this cabin to save my soul."

The door closed. Ida picked up one of her mother's

books, read the title with a sardonic smile. *A History of Heraldry, by a Pursuivant of The College of Arms.* She had already forgotten about the long envelope; in any case she had taken it to be a copy of the will. But Mrs. Weiss had other notions, and those notions had created tumult in her breast; indeed, she was so excited that she was short of breath.

Relief swept over her as, outside the cabin door, she found the corridor deserted. It was the work of a moment only to tuck the envelope down her corsage. Her pulse racing, she panted her way up the companion staircase. Would Ida mention the matter to Mr. Dunne? No. Mrs. Weiss was fairly sure of that. Whatever else might be said about Ida, she was discreet.

3

No wind, no sound at all save the rumble of engines, no motion of the ship as she rode on a perfectly even keel in the still waters of the canal. Mrs. Weiss had locked her door; the guests had all retired; in the plenitude of her flesh she lay on the bed, enormously breathing, magnificently fat. On the table by her side a cigarette burned away unheeded; her high colour and the steady absorption of her eyes were the products of excitement such as she had rarely known as she studied the last will and testament of Sir John Withers.

It was dated the fourth of December nineteen hundred and thirty-four, and she had a vague idea that Sir John had died some time in January nineteen thirty-five. The will had evidently been drawn up in his own handwriting: text and signature were by the same pen. It was duly witnessed by two witnesses, and therefore a valid legal document, as she well knew.

Oblivious to everything save the matter in hand, she read on with a growing stimulation as clause after clause disclosed the fantastic intentions of the testator; as sentence

after sentence carried her ever more nearly to the goal which she had set for herself. With an effort she forced herself to a cold estimate of the probabilities. Everything, she felt, pointed to the fact that this was a later will than the one under which Dunne had benefited. Would Sir John, she asked herself, have written out the will in his own hand if he had been within reach of his lawyers? And what a piece of good fortune had befallen her: that it should have lain undiscovered behind this drawer until she came along—it was miraculous, and for a moment or two the eyes of Mrs. Weiss were blurred with tears of gratitude.

And what of the will? What of Dunne's reaction to its contents, once it was established as the true instrument of Sir John's wishes? Here was Dunne, newly entered into a life of supreme happiness, after gruelling years passed under conditions which were not at all to his taste. And under this will he was offered nothing but bitterness, the collapse of his world, the ruin of all his hopes. The more Mrs. Weiss considered things in all their aspects the further was she convinced of final success. For the weapon of this will had a double edge. Not only did it deprive Dunne of everything he now possessed: it disposed of the testator's property in such a way that nine men out of ten would feel themselves in duty bound to oppose it.

She looked again at the date—Fourth of December nineteen hundred and thirty-four. There lay the key to her hopes and fears. She trembled. Not until she had news from London would she know peace.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Thunderstorm

1

THE PASSENGERS ON BOARD the *Aphrodite* had thought that they knew something about heat. They knew nothing. The quiet breeze in the Red Sea came to meet them with tongues of fire. Through smoked glasses they cast occasional glances at the sun, a molten mass in a flaming sky. Arrant nonsense to suppose that ninety-three million miles separated them from that white-hot torment—ninety miles was an estimate more in accordance with the evidence. To touch the brasswork on the upper deck was to burn the flesh; the deck itself was so hot that it seemed as if it must presently gape and crack; the horizon was thick with dazzling vapours. The passengers breathed in a furnace and prayed for the night. Conventions had gone by the board. They wore bathing-suits. From time to time they hosed each other from the salt-water tank on the upper bridge. The water was more than tepid—it was fully warm. Michael Dunne solemnly broke an egg on the engine-room casing. It fried. Weakly, they laughed as they watched it sizzling.

The days prolonged themselves in discomfort and the nights brought indifferent relief. There were some fourteen hundred miles of the Red Sea and every yard was gruelling. Out into the Gulf of Aden and into the Arabian Sea with Abd el Kuri swinging away on the starboard quarter. Aden to Bombay, said Mr. Puckle, sixteen hundred and sixty-five miles—the Captain had told him. Nobody answered. This heat wouldn't last, said Mr. Puckle further: the Captain had told him that too. The glass was falling, most likely there would be a thunderstorm.

From time to time the steward came up with cooling



drinks, and Mr. Puckle, eyeing him vindictively, imagined what he would do with Albert Sims if by some magic the rest of the ship's company might be spirited away. To be rushed out of fifteen hundred pounds by a little squirt who was on the face of it a novice was galling, and Mr. Puckle could not think of it without coming near to frenzy. Meantime, dark schemes for the restoration of what was an infuriating situation took shape in his mind and were rejected one after the other. He was beaten, and he knew it. Worse: that goddamned little tick of a bell-hop was for ever giving him saucy looks; every time they met in the corridor or in Mr. Puckle's cabin Albert Sims would bend a triumphant eye and underline it with a dry smile. And 'Mr. Puckle, looking back over the events of this trip, conceived a violent distaste for his surroundings: never again would he embark himself on board a yacht. Moreover, as soon as ever he cashed in at Bombay he'd be shot of the whole business—cut his losses and book a passage to New York.

The afternoon wore on. Michael Dunne walked for'ard, looked over the dodger at the sweet confluence of lines which terminated in the *Aphrodite's* stem, looked aft at the red ensign which hung heavy and limp in the torrid air, at the fat wreath of smoke which, pluming its black oiliness from the funnel, was still visible a mile or more astern. More than as a mere property he regarded the yacht as a creature possessing in some small measure a sentience of her own; certainly she had personality; that was instinct in every rivet, every plank, every grace of movement which she so richly possessed. Dozens of people had commented to him on the justness of her proportions, the beauty of her design, the airy lightness with which she floated upon her native element. Looking now upon her upper structure he had also in mind the picture of her outward appearance, the gentle curve of her maiden's waist tricked out in gleaming white enamel with a broad yellow line at the water's edge. Well, he must cut his coat accord-

ing to his cloth, say farewell with a good grace, and thank his lucky stars that he had made at least one voyage in her.

He turned into the wheelhouse, noting the high polish on the engine-room telegraph, the binnacle, the little brass wheel. The grating upon which the helmsman stood was shark-skinned to a snowy whiteness, the gleaming paint behind him faintly reflected his tall figure, the glass of the revolution indicator was spotless and dazzling. Captain Sale said:

"Well, sir, how do you like this weather?"

"It gets a bit wearisome, Captain. Mr. Puckle brought rumours of a break. Is that at all likely?"

"I should say it's a certainty, sir. The aneroid says twenty-seven eighty-nine. A nice thunderstorm, that's what I want. Do a lot of good."

Dunne looked at the wheel. "I've been wondering," he said, "if I might take over."

"The helm?" Captain Sale chuckled. "Well, sir, she's all yours. Why not? You can go down for a smoke, quartermaster. Twenty minutes."

Dunne stepped on to the grating, took the wheel in his hands, with Captain Sale standing by his side.

"Now, sir—you see that black mark on the compass-bowl? That's the lubber's point. It stands for the ship's head, see? Whichever way that lubber's point swings you put your wheel in the opposite direction to bring her head back to the course. The course is east a quarter north. If you keep her on east for the time being we shan't go far wrong."

The lubber's point curtseyed, began to edge to port. Dunne spun the wheel through ten degrees, whereupon Captain Sale cried:

"Whoa! Belay, sir, belay. She only needs a touch—just two or three spokes. And when she begins to come back, just steady her with a spoke or two. Can do?"

"I think I get the idea," muttered Dunne.

He gazed ahead at the jackstaff, dipping and rising

against the line of the horizon. With his two hands he controlled the ship. His heart sang. He felt extraordinarily happy. But there ran through his happiness a thread of sombreness.

Cut your coat, said an inner voice, *according to your cloth.*

2

The sun was obscured by vapours, the vapours thickened to a blackness which turned day into dusk, the sea changed colour from a cobalt blue to a darkly gleaming green. Finally, with the entire firmament seeming to shrink and close in upon them like a sooty ceiling, the storm was upon them with a flash and a grand opening peal. And it rained; it rained, not drops of moisture, but heavy chunks as big as marbles. Whilst the sky was livid and thunder set the whole ship vibrating the rain rattled and thumped on the awning, ran in streams down the scuppers, fell with unbelievable splashes on the decks, so that they flowed with a tumult of small wavelets. Ida Weiss ran out to greet the rain, threw up her head, her arms, abandoned herself joyfully to the gift of coolness, lay down, and laughed, and rolled over and over as the water danced on the white planks. Kay French, Lady Eleanor, and Ada Letts followed suit. Mr. Wix woke up with a start, heard the volleying clatter on the awning, blinked as the whole sky took fire from a blinding flash, and shivered to a cool breeze. Turning, his eye met that of Mrs. Weiss.

"Spot of rain, madam," he said.

"I'll tell the world it's a spot of rain," said Mrs. Weiss. She raised her voice. "Ida dear! Momma wants to go below. Will you get her umbrella?"

3

Looking back on recent events Mrs. Weiss felt the relief and satisfaction of an amateur who has successfully nego-

tiated a tightrope. Getting hold of a London Directory had been a ticklish business in Aden with Ida on hand all the time; the sending of a cable to a firm of enquiry agents in London had been attended with no small risk, for she had never had occasion to hide anything from her daughter, and a sudden switch to secretiveness would naturally have aroused her suspicions. But the issue at stake was worth any subterfuge; it had turned Mrs. Weiss from a woman who was merely surpassingly silly into a creature of cunning and stealth who would stoop to any shabbiness in order to gain her ends. So Ida was left on the seat outside the post office at Aden with the explanation that momma was planning another surprise for her.

"Well," Ida had said, "that's O.K. with me, Mrs. Weiss dear. But I guess you're a sufficient surprise in yourself. Every day, momma, you stagger me with new amazements."

"You ought not to make fun of your mother, Ida. One day I—huh—shan't be here to make fun of."

"What's special about that, darling? In less than a hundred years none of us will be here."

Mrs. Weiss's cable ran as follows:

Crumley and Harris, Private Enquiries, 158 Leadbeater Street London W.C.2. Order herewith for £20. Will you examine will of late Sir John Withers at Somerset House and note date. Inform me by wireless telegraphy. Mrs. Weiss S.Y. Aphrodite Aden to Bombay.

Nothing to do after that but sit down and wait, and this was a task that disturbed her whole organism. A hearty eater, Mrs. Weiss lost her appetite. Her copious flow of talk was reduced to a mere trickle. Absorbed, with one eye on the wireless-room, she lived in a fever of impatience and uncertainty. From time to time she looked forward to the possible interview with Dunne and tried to imagine what course it would take. Of one thing she was sure: it would be an ordeal. She was under no illusions about the ethics of what she proposed to do. It was an abominably

shabby thing, despicable in the last degree, and she anticipated Dunne's disgust and contempt with no little apprehension. But, ordeal or no, she was committed to this thing inexorably. Her infatuation with the idea of caste was complete. For the gift of an aristocratic son-in-law she was prepared to pay with her own shame, since money could not buy it. Meantime, she made to herself the excuse that the whole affair was in the nature of a sacrifice to her only daughter. As to her capability of going through with the interview to the bitter end, that was never in question. What Mrs. Weiss was most concerned about was the aftermath. With Dunne safely married to Ida she would have gained her first and most important objective. The second was to gain his friendship after coercing his will. Would he ever speak to her again?

She returned again to the subject of her daughter. She thought of her as afflicted, she remembered her childhood made unhappy by her unfortunate appearance, she remembered her own horror when she had first looked upon the wizened little creature to which she had given birth, with its puckered face of a chimpanzee. True, Ida had grown into something immeasurably better than might have been expected; what had once been unnatural was now merely unusual; she had at least two claims to beauty in her fine eyes and her perfect teeth, and when she smiled the whole face was irradiated in a way that gave it actual attractiveness. And now?

The girl was in love. Mrs. Weiss knew this beyond doubt. She had watched her carefully whenever she was in Dunne's company. Mrs. Weiss said to herself: "It's Ida's happiness that matters. And this means Ida's happiness. Nobody can get away from that, nobody can say you're not considering Ida. It's her due, she's suffered, any mother would do what you're going to do in the same circumstances."

Lady Eleanor? Mrs. Weiss's expression hardened a thought as this name was repeated in her mind. It was

unfortunate that Dunne's heart should be already engaged. The difficulty was there, and it had to be faced. And, facing it, Mrs. Weiss decided that, after all, it was a mole-hill rather than a mountain. Lady Eleanor had let fall one or two remarks during conversations artfully designed by Mrs. Weiss which revealed her financial position. In her own right she had five hundred pounds a year. Her marriage, whilst improving that income, had added nothing to her capital. Divorced, she would remain a poor woman. Would Dunne, stripped of his new-found wealth, ask her to marry a poor man? Was it conceivable that he would be prepared to lose all rather than marry anyone else?

Mrs. Weiss answered neither of these questions at the moment, for she saw the figure of Mr. Brindle entering the wireless-room. She arose with some haste from her chair, and followed in his wake. It flashed across her mind as she crossed the deserted deck that her fortunes were on the wax, for the others were at dinner, a meal which she had decided to forgo.

She knocked on the door, entered in answer to Mr. Brindle's invitation.

"It is Mr. Brindle, isn't it?" she said.

"Brindle, that's right, ma'am."

"My daughter's been telling me about you."

"Oh, yes?" Mr. Brindle smiled. "I'm afraid it wouldn't be anything very interesting."

"You gave her a rug, I believe?"

"Oh, that?"

"She thinks it's swell," said Mrs. Weiss. "She likes men who do things, who—huh—make things with their hands."

"That's very nice of her," said Mr. Brindle. "I liked doing it for her."

"What I really came in about," said Mrs. Weiss, "was this. I'm expecting a wireless message at any moment, and I wanted to warn you about it. If it should happen to come when I'm on deck, or in the saloon, or in my

daughter's cabin, don't hand it to me. Do you understand? "

" You don't want anybody else to know about it—is that what you mean, ma'am? "

" That's what I mean."

" Then it'll be best if I make sure that you're in your cabin before parting with the message? "

" That will be best, Mr. Brindle."

" Right, I'll do that, ma'am. And I'll pass on those instructions to my opposite number. You see, ma'am, we don't carry a wireless officer, so it's left to me and Mr. Fay between us."

" I see."

Mrs. Weiss looked at the coloured lady in the corner.

" Dear me," she said. " I guess that looks kind of peculiar in a wireless office. Is it yours? "

" No, ma'am, not mine. She just belongs there. I reckon somebody spent his month's pay on that statue and got a hangover thrown in."

Mrs. Weiss opened the door, paused for a moment, closed it again.

Ida liked Mr. Brindle. Mr. Brindle liked Ida. It had occurred to her as an afterthought that she might please both of them by making a suggestion.

" Oh," she said, " by the way. My daughter may be getting married shortly. This is entirely between ourselves, Mr. Brindle."

" Of course, ma'am."

" I'm sure she'd like to have you at the wedding. I wonder if you'd care to be a witness? "

Mr. Brindle heard the door close. He was alone. He saw himself raising his glass to her whilst she sat in his chair. " I shall never forget," he had said.

No, he would never forget. Slowly, he adjusted the ear-phones on his head, began to listen in.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Midnight Interview

I

MRS. WEISS received the information she so ardently desired just as she entered her cabin after saying good night to Dunne. The message said: *Will in question proved March sixteenth nineteen hundred and twenty-four.*

"Thank you, officer," said Mrs. Weiss to the second mate. The immediate physical reaction was a heavy thump of her heart. It began to race, it reminded her of her first visit to the dentist as a child.

It was not often that Mrs. Weiss drank anything after dinner, but her first act was to press the bell for the steward and order a double brandy. Like the soldier at zero hour, she was going over the top, and she felt the need of something to improve her aggressive spirit. When it arrived she drank it down without delay. Two or three seconds later she was knocking on the door of Dunne's cabin.

"Come in."

She went inside with her head high and her eyes unwavering, like a woman who had nothing to be ashamed of. Dunne, turning round to look at her, had plainly expected someone else, was obviously surprised to see Mrs. Weiss in his cabin at so late an hour.

"Oh," he said, "it's Mrs. Weiss. There's something you want?"

Mrs. Weiss closed the door behind her with the deliberation which precedes an intention to stay, and Dunne, sensing this intention, was dismayed. He was not intolerant of human failings, and he found most fools easy to get on with. But Mrs. Weiss's foolishness was of a kind that infuriated him. Was he in for a long session of her tiresome drivelling

about ye olde Tudor and the importance of pedigree? No. There was a limit to everything.

"I'm afraid," he said, "I haven't got much time, Mrs. Weiss. If you can possibly make it snappy I shall be——"

"I guess I've got to apologize," put in Mrs. Weiss, "for disturbing you at this time. Believe me, Mr. Dunne, I wouldn't have knocked on your door at this hour unless something very important demanded it. Something very important," she added, "to both of us."

Dunne stared hard into her eyes. It occurred to him that there was something different about them, something vaguely disturbing which he couldn't define. He said:

"I hope you won't think me rude, Mrs. Weiss, if I say that our views of what constitutes something very important are unlikely to agree."

"In this case," said Mrs. Weiss, "the agreement will be all on your side. May I sit down?"

"Of course. Forgive me. I'm a little tired. And, I do think, Mrs. Weiss, that you could have chosen a more suitable moment to disclose this very important information."

Mrs. Weiss was rather glad he was taking this high-handed line. He was being rude to her, he was being sarcastic. All right. He had it coming to him. She said:

"I guess it was the moment that chose me. It was less than a minute ago that I received the information by wireless."

"Wireless?" He looked blank. What possible connection could the wireless have with him? She went on:

"Mr. Dunne, I guess this interview is going to be unpleasant for both of us, I guess you're going to see a mother's—huh—agony and shame. Please understand that what I'm going to say is not for myself. It's for my own flesh and blood, for my baby, Ida. When I think of that child—well, I'll tell the world my heart goes out to her. There's nothing I wouldn't do for my Ida, nothing at all. I guess I can take it, Mr. Dunne—all that's coming to me."

"Perhaps," suggested Dunne, wearily, "it would be

better if you came to the point? This wireless message, for instance."

"Sure," said Mrs. Weiss. "The wireless message. I guess you're going to think me all kinds of a snake, I guess maybe you're going to loathe the sight of me before we're through. Well, that's my—huh—cross, and I'll bear it."

"No doubt," agreed Dunne, curtly. "But will you please reveal the contents of the message? I'm very tired, Mrs. Weiss."

"It was about a will."

"Oh, yes?"

"The will of the late Sir John Withers."

A wireless message, a will, a cross to bear. It all seemed rather fantastic to Dunne. He began to suspect that Mrs. Weiss was perhaps more than merely silly, and looked at her sharply. Was the woman an idiot? He said:

"Yes? Go on."

"Mr. Dunne," she said, earnestly, "I wonder if you have ever considered poverty? A sudden—huh—catastrophe, everything swept away. This beautiful yacht, everything, down to the last dollar-bill, your whole life ruined. I guess that would be pretty tough, I guess maybe you'd feel like you were caught up by the mills of God."

"I really must ask you to stick to the point, Madam. You were talking about a will?"

"The will under which you benefited," said Mrs. Weiss, "was proved on March sixteenth nineteen hundred and twenty-four."

"Was it? I'm afraid I don't remember the date. What about it?"

"There's another will, dated December nineteen thirty-four. Didn't Sir John die suddenly on this yacht?"

"That is so."

"I guess maybe he made out that will just before he died. I was looking for something the other day, Mr. Dunne, and I found this will had fallen down behind the drawers in the dressing-chest."

2

No, thought Dunne, eyeing her, not an idiot. Sudden catastrophe—everything, down to the last penny. He began to see what she was driving at. He saw, too, what catastrophe would mean to him. It was a grim prospect.

Mrs. Weiss was searching in a large reticule, from which she produced a long envelope, folded in two. He regarded her with contempt and disgust; if she had dropped dead in the next moment he could have borne it with equanimity. But uppermost in his mind was a feeling of incredulity that snobbery should be carried to such fanatical lengths. He said:

"And having found the will you wired London to check up on it? You have been very industrious, my dear lady."

"For Ida's sake, Mr. Dunne. You don't know what these years have been for me. I guess it's made my heart ache to see that child——"

"I think I'm right," interrupted Dunne, "in saying that I believe Ida would rather be left out of this conversation. In fact, I think she'd be horrified if she knew."

"Sure she'd be horrified. I'm glad you recognize her true worth, Mr. Dunne. Ida's a grand girl. Whatever way it turns out, I feel I'm doing the right thing by my baby. If I'm called upon to suffer, why, I guess——"

"I think we'll cut all that out and come down to cases," put in Dunne. "Will you read the will? Or shall I?"

"If you don't mind, I think I——"

"Naturally. You judge others by your own standards. I might be tempted to tear it up."

Mrs. Weiss began to read.

"This," she announced, "is the last will and testament of me, Johu Harrington Withers. Let it be understood that I have given earnest consideration to the matters hereunder dealt with, and that I am of sound testamentary capacity. Hereby, my previous will dated March the six-

teenth, nineteen hundred and twenty-four, is revoked in its entirety and made void.

"Having no near relative who might claim a title to my beneficence, and being convinced that in the Fascist Party of Great Britain rests the country's sole hope of emerging to that place and pride which was once the glory of the world, I hereby make and bequeath the whole of my personal property, lands and hereditaments whatsoever to the Fascist Organization of Great Britain for what I hope will be the successful furtherance of their aims and ends. Given under my hand and seal this day fourth of December nineteen hundred and thirty-four."

3

Dunne's face was a study in gravity as he stared at his companion. His hand reached out for a cigarette. He lit it, inhaled deeply, breathed out the smoke. This woman, he thought, is shrewd, and, yes, devilish. She knows damned well that the terms of this will turn it into an outrageous document. She's pretty sure that if she will disposed of the estate in a reasonable way I'd be the first to notify the proper people. And she guesses that, as things are, I'd be willing to strain the ethical niceties more than a little.

But, he asked himself, does the ethical question enter into it at all? Everybody knows what Fascism stands for: they have the examples of Italy and Germany. Any decent man would consider it almost a duty to burn such a will. I'm not sure, anyway, that it would hold water. If I were to fight it, if the other legatees——

No. Legal battles were costly. He might easily beggar himself and lose the day. And what did the woman want? A wry smile quirked his lips at this thought. He thought of Lady Eleanor, and he felt helpless like a man behind bars in the condemned cell. He said:

"Cunning, and lying, and snivelling hypocrisy, and besoilment. They make a pretty list, Mrs. Weiss."

Mrs. Weiss blew her nose. A large tear rolled gently down her cheek.

"I guess," she muttered, "it's no good to tell you how I feel about this. I—I like you, Mr. Dunne."

"You do?" He gave a short laugh. "God help me."

"It hurts me terribly to have to—huh——"

Dunne arose. He'd had enough. Very curtly:

"Madam," he said, "I know what you want. I'll think it over. Meantime, I must ask you to get out."

"May I say one word? Ida is—Mr. Dunne, the child loves you. She——"

He looked very grim as he opened the door.

"You have a genius," he told her, "for the distasteful. As for your daughter, she's much to be pitied, she's been very unfortunate."

There burst forth from Mrs. Weiss something like a sob.

"Oh," she cried. "I do agree, Mr. Dunne. You don't know how——"

"How badly," he interrupted quickly, "she is served by her mother? Indeed I do."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Bitter-sweet

1

SOUNDLESS LIKE a white ghost the *Aphrodite* slipped through the dusk. The sleeping sea, flat like a disk of onyx, parted before the knife-edge of her forefoot with a quiet sigh, chattered soft music past her sides, was joined again astern in a mingle of darting lights and creamy foam. Dunne and Lady Eleanor leaned over the stern rail and peered at the phosphorescent fireballs tumbling and darting in the depths. For a long time they were silent. Then Lady Eleanor said:

"She's an extraordinary woman, Michael, an incredible woman."

"You're being very polite, Eleanor," he said, bitterly. "The woman's an obscenity. Nothing she wouldn't do for her Ida, nothing at all. Her child, her baby, her own flesh and blood. Flesh and blood my foot! It's her own flesh, her own grossness that she wants to benefit. She actually produced tears. 'It hurts me to do this, Mr. Dunne,' she said. 'I like you.' And this isn't a drooling maniac I'm talking about either. She's a dangerous woman."

"I do think it's a shame," murmured Lady Eleanor.

"What's a shame?"

"All of it."

"It's more than a shame, it's a tragedy, Eleanor."

"She's such a nice girl. It's preposterous that she should have such a mother."

"That's exactly what I told her—the Weiss woman, I mean. But I'm afraid all my reserves of sympathy are used up. What I've got left is for myself alone."

"None for me?"

"You know very well that when I think of myself I think of you, Eleanor. For ever and ever."

"Till death do us part? Don't be intense, Michael."

"Do you expect me to be light-hearted? This is pretty grim for me, Eleanor, and for some reason best known to yourself you choose to be flippant about it."

"I'm sorry, Michael, but I can't weep. I'm just resigned. Marriage made me tough, my dear. It buttressed my endurance and gave me a hard heart. There's only one way out of this impasse and you've got to take it. And remember that it will give you this yacht. You'll be a very wealthy man. There'll be endless compensations."

"Nothing can compensate for the loss of you."

"Nonsense. You dramatize too much, Michael. You and Ida will get along admirably. You'll settle down and be happy as a young puppy."

"That's your last word?"

"Absolutely."

"It's fantastic! "

"What is?"

"The whole situation. The will, that damned Ida, and you. Did you ever know of anything more melodramatic?"

"Life," she said, "it apt to be melodramatic."

"Damn it! " he burst forth. "I won't do it. I'll tell her to go to hell and——"

She put a hand on his arm.

"You will do it, Michael. You'll do it for me. In any case, it's your duty. That will is unthinkable. Fascism is a horror. It's a denial of the human spirit. It's ugly with secret police, spying, poisonous propaganda. Think of the concentration camps in Germany. Torture is their countersign and they make a trade of murder. Are you going to consider your own welfare in the face of that?"

He slipped an arm round her waist. "You're a lovely woman, Eleanor." God alone knows how much I love you."

"Thank you, Michael. But . . . need we talk about ourselves? It can only aggravate the situation. We mustn't whine. Self-pity's a detestable thing."

For a long time he was silent. Then:

"Has it occurred to you," he said, "that we're compounding a felony?"

"No. We're obstructing one. In this case, Michael, the moral obligation is greater than the legal one. Was that the dinner-bell?" Gently, she disengaged herself. "Human beings are curious creatures. I can still find a little pity for Mrs. Weiss. She's vicious, she's unscrupulous, she's everything that's unattractive, but I still feel sorry for her. And I'm glad I'm not made like that, I'm glad I'm myself."

"Pity?" said Dunne. "No, Eleanor. I'm afraid I can't rise to such heights. Do you know what I'd like to do with her?"

"I can guess. But you've got to dissimulate. No black looks, Michael. You must be very civil to her, even nice. It would never do to let Ida suspect."

"It will call," said Dunne, grimly, "for my utmost endeavours."

Suddenly, he turned and took her in his arms. "Eleanor. Darling Eleanor."

She held him off. "Had we better——"

"I'm not going to be tiresome. This is the last time. I want something. A kiss. One kiss to remember you by."

"Michael. No. It isn't wise. There's no point——"

"A curse," he muttered, "on wisdom. To hell with points. Don't I deserve it? Don't we both deserve it?"

"Very well," she whispered. She closed her eyes, lifted her lips to his, and gave herself up to the bitter sweetness of good-bye.

2

Mr. Brindle closed the door of the wireless-room behind them. For a moment they were very close together, the air was sweet with her perfume, her dark hair gleamed like jet, her skin had the delicate texture of a flower, and there was a vestal glow in her eyes. Mr. Brindle, having noted these magical matters, averted his glance; he could not look at her very long without a feeling of trespass. Also he had a tendency towards blushing confusion. She said:

"What a cute little hideout. It's even smaller than it looks from the outside."

"Yes," said Mr. Brindle, "there isn't much room. Won't you sit down? Perhaps you'd like to listen in."

"I guess I'd love to," said Ida.

She had some difficulty in adjusting the earphones, and Mr. Brindle came to her rescue, a proceeding which involved his touching her hand. Surely, he thought, no hand was ever so cool and so beautiful; and all at once for a moment of time he was a small boy again, fondling a lily in his father's garden.

"There," he said, with a deep breath, "is that all right?"

"That's fine." She listened, and Mr. Brindle, standing off, watched her face marked with a childlike absorption. If he could have seen his own face it would undoubtedly have surprised him with its look of wistful tenderness.

"So," she murmured, "that's Morse? Well, I guess it's all double Dutch to me. Is it anything important?"

"No, it won't be anything important," said Mr. Brindle.

"Can you read it out whilst you listen?"

"Oh, yes, it's quite simple."

Ida handed over the phones, Mr. Brindle clamped them on his ears, and announced, slowly:

"Eastern . . . area . . . light . . . variable . . . winds . . . some . . . cloud . . . visibility . . . good." He took the phones off. "Just a weather forecast."

"You're very clever," she assured him. "If I lived to be a hundred I'd never pick that up."

"It's pretty simple to learn," said Mr. Brindle. "I shouldn't think there could be a simpler system—just a matter of dots and dashes, that's all. Will you have a cigarette?"

"Sure I'll have a cigarette. I guess it must be nice to be a sailor, Mr. Brindle. It's a sort of clean, untainted life, untainted by the money principle, I mean. Life ashore: well, it's a scramble for dough, everybody double-crossing the other guy to chisel him out of a few dollars. Well, perhaps not everybody, but that's a pretty general picture."

"Yes," said Mr. Brindle, "it's a grand life. I wouldn't have any other. And one day, perhaps, I'll get a command. I carry an extra master's ticket, you know."

"I wouldn't know about that. What is it?"

"Oh, a sort of certificate of efficiency, a title to command ships."

She looked at him. "Yes, I guess you'd make a grand captain, Mr. Brindle. Solid, and trustworthy, and calm. I can't see you ever getting rattled or going haywire."

Mr. Brindle gave her a shy smile. "It takes a lot to upset me," he admitted. "Still, I won't say that I couldn't read the riot act if it was necessary."

A pause. Then:

"Mr. Brindle, I've got some news for you. Will you come to my wedding in Bombay?"

Mr. Brindle wasn't prepared for this. Her eyes were looking into his, and he stared back, fascinated, trying to smile with a mouth gone suddenly stiff and unmanageable. It was a dreadful moment for him; he felt that his whole soul had become visible in his face; as if the secret corner of his heart had been turned out for inspection. But, at last:

"Why, yes, miss," he said, "I'll be honoured. I—may I congratulate you?"

But Ida didn't reply for a moment. Her glance had strayed to the wireless log on the table. It was open, and a breeze coming through the porthole had blown away a wireless form that lay over the page.

Every message that came through was entered in the log. She couldn't help getting the sense of this one. It said:

Mrs. Weiss, S.Y. Aphrodite. Will in question proved March sixteenth nineteen hundred and twenty-four. Crumley and Harris, Leadbeater Street, London.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

News From England

1

NOTHING, SO FAR, had compared with the approaches to Bombay. The *Aphrodite* floated serenely amidst a calm beauty which, consisting of purple mountains and fringes of palms, seemed to have inspired the architects to build

in chastity. The big buildings which formed the foreground on the left had a nobility and stateliness Utopian in conception; the houses scattered along the slopes of Malabar Hill were in complete harmony with the general scheme of nature; the entire scene was a panoramic piece of perfection, and the passengers, surveying this fairy-land through binoculars, cried out in wonder and delight. Mr. Puckle had seen it all before. Also Mr. Puckle was not keenly susceptible to the physical characteristics of nature; he was conscious only, as they drew ever nearer to Bombay, of his approaching release; he was looking forward ardently to the time, now not far distant, when he would, upheld by a matter of three thousand dollars, march lightheartedly along Chowpathy Sea Face to the shipping office and buy himself a ticket to the States. Not a moment longer than was necessary would he remain on board this goddamned yacht in company with Mr. Wix. For Mr. Wix was continually giving him scares, making his life unbearable. Mr. Wix, under a cloak of good fellowship, would smash him on the back. "How are you, Puckle?" he would cry, and Mr. Puckle would be hit with what seemed like a cartload of bricks. Also his right arm was black and blue from the steel pincers of Mr. Wix's fingers. "All right, Puckle, old boy?"—and the vice would close down on his bicep until Mr. Puckle almost cried out with the agony. As for that two-timing little pimp, the steward—but no, Mr. Puckle refused to think about him. Never in his whole life had a voyage been so ill-starred as this one. He was through. It was time to pack it in, lest worse befall him. Rapt, he gazed at the beauties of Bombay and saw only the Hudson River, the New York skyline, and the milling crowds on Broadway of a Saturday night.

The *Aphrodite* slowly approached the buoy, went full astern whilst the seaman standing on the fender slung over the bows jumped down on to the buoy and rove the end of the wire through the heavy ring. Mr. Brindle, dreaming on the fo'c'sle, returned to immediate things with a start,

and let out a yell to the Captain: "All fast for'ard, sir!" Albert Sims, cheerful as a cricket in a bakehouse, dumped three bags by the gangway and approached Mr. Puckle.

"I've put your luggage by the accommodation ladder, sir," he said, whereupon Miss Letts stared blankly.

"Why, Mr. Puckle," she exclaimed, "are you leaving us?"

"I guess," said Mr. Puckle, "I've got no option, sister. I gotta go home. My partner wirelesslyed for me, I gotta swing a big business deal."

"What a shame," said Ada Letts. "And what an expense—all your fare gone for nothing."

"Not all of it," replied Mr. Puckle. "I guess Mr. Dunne's a white man, I'll tell the world he's a swell guy."

"He returned something?"

"Two hundred pounds. Yes, I'll say that's downright handsome."

"I shall miss you," said Ada Letts.

"Will you? Kinda nice of you to say that, Miss Letts. I guess I'll miss you too." Mr. Puckle spun round in answer to a question from Lady Eleanor. "Yes, ladyship, Wally Puckle's sure taking the next boat home. Got an urgent call, gotta get the old nose down to the grindstone. Yes, it's tough, it's kinda fierce. I guess I've enjoyed your company. Still, you never know. This little old planet ain't all that big. We might meet again. Well, so-long, Lady Eleanor, in case I don't see you again. Been grand to know you."

Mr. Wix sat very still in the deserted saloon. The post office tender had come alongside, and he had received a letter. With the letter had come a photograph of an old man. There were not many faces like this about nowadays: it wore the mutton-chop side-whiskers of a bygone day, and the faint beginnings of a smile, and the simple integrity of a man who dealt justly with his fellows and

walked upright before his Maker. The Gladstonian collar curved upwards in two sweeps like the plumed bow-wave of a ship, revealing the loose puckered skin of the throat, the black cravat carried a horseshoe tiepin set with small diamonds, and the ancient cut of the coat and waistcoat proclaimed a suit that had been carefully harboured for half a lifetime. Incredible that this simple old man should have made so much money. But, partly out of luck, partly out of his frugal tastes, his first freehold had multiplied itself by a hundred and more, until now he was a very wealthy man.

His wife had died young, leaving him with an only son. From the beginning he had idolized young John. Nothing had been too good for him. From a public school he had gone on to Oxford, and from Oxford he went straight into the hotel business. The taint of which his father had been in terror had already begun to work in young Johnny Wix. Handsome as his mother, strong as a lion, he had at odd moments that same indefinable expression in his eyes that the old man had known so well when his wife was alive. There was, as he well knew, no stopping the process; it was inevitable as the germination of life from the seed.

Sadly, the old man resigned himself to the disappointment of his dearest hopes. It was not in his nature to deny anything to his son. He bought the freeholds of one hotel after another. But young Johnny Wix was not the kind of man who lives and dies under one roof-tree. Tiring of all his properties in swift succession, he would sell out, spend the proceeds, and call upon his father for more. He never asked in vain, and if he was ever reproached, it was only by the sadness in the old man's face.

And now the old man was older, and the days of Johnny's youth were far away.

Mr. Wix stared at the photograph for a long time. He

was shocked by the change. He had a great affection for his father, and endless gratitude. And this photograph was the photograph of a dying man. He opened the letter, and began to read it.

My dear Johnny, it said, you'll be surprised to get a letter from me, I never was much of a hand at pen work, so please excuse speling and bad writing. Well Johnny how are you, well I hope, but I can't say that's how it leaves me at present, and you'll be surprised to hear that getting my photo taken the other day properly nocked me up.

Dear Johnny I don't think it's a good thing to leave bad news till the last as you now I always beleaved in getting it off your chest which is the best thing for yourself and everybody else. As I said to the doctor give it to me straight from the sholder, it's a poor sort of man who can't take his medicine.

Well Johnny it's cancer, and the doctor gives me a month to live. I've had a lot of pain lately and can't keep anything down cancer of the gullet it is and as you can guess it's no fun me always being such a harty eater. You'll be surprised to hear this me looking so well in the photo but my looks never did pity me and if I was half dead I reckon I'd look fit for a ten mile walk.

I've been thinking a lot lately about olden times and the first word which you ever spoke which was butter. Do you remember when I first took you to Hull Fair and how you staid on the roundabouts a hole hour. And the time you buried your school books in farmer Brouton's field and burnt your hair lighting a cigaret.

Dear Johnny I was in two minds whether to write this letter but I thought after all it's better than him coming home and finding a gravestone to welcome him. And then again I thought well it's hard to go without saying good-bye to your own, so it seems I had to write it for better or worse. As you know my boy I've always tried to do well by you and if things haven't panned out as I wanted

neether of us is to blame. You've had a gentleman's life, never soiled your hands, always enjoyed yourself and mixed with the best in the land. If your satisfied so am I. As for money, my boy, you've never wanted for a thousand pounds, and I hope you never will. I don't know what I'm worth, not rightly, but I've put £50,000 to your credit at the bank so you can draw on it when you come home, and there's another £150,000 tied up in house property.

I've always been proud of you, I don't think I've ever seen a handsomer man and I always said that nothink but the Lord Mayor's coach would ever do you justice. And I reckon that the best compliment I can pay myself is to say that it's been a pleasure to know you.

One last word about money. There's a lot of it, my boy, and it never does any harm to give a bit away now and again. And I can recommend it, Johnny. There's one or two men who wouldn't have been prosperous to-day if it hadent been for me, and I get a lot of good solid pleasure out of their smiling faces.

Now if this letter is going to mess up your holiday I would sooner have cut off my right hand. It isn't as if a man was done for when he's dead. If you've got anything you particly want to say to me it can wait. And, one of these days, if you should happen to be looking at my stone for old time's sake, just put it into words. I'll be there, boy, never fear. And I shall hear it, even if it's only a whisper.

So don't whatever you do come home in a hurry. This is an order, not a request. Funny that it should be the first and the last.

There was a PS. at the end of the letter. One or two of the old man's tenants, it seemed, were living rent free. "I know," wrote Mr. Wix senior, "that you wouldn't want to make any difference, Johnny, but I just thought I'd mention it."

Mr. Wix put the letter away. If I know anything about

it, he thought, one or two means ten or twenty.

He looked at his watch. Time had suddenly become important to him. If his father had given him an order the tone of his letter countermanded it. For Mr. Wix, every sentence had been written by an old man pining for a last look at his only son.

4

Never had Ida looked so attractive. A spanking grey *tailleur*, grey shoes and stockings, a skittish little toque worn slantwise over one eye with curled ostrich feathers in contrasting tones of dove-grey and lilac, a grey kid bag—she was the pink of elegance and the summit of supple motion. She wore a high colour. Her eyes were clear and brilliant as the noonday sun. But she didn't smile; indeed there was a thought of sternness about her; she looked like a woman who has summoned up all her resources to face crisis.

Mrs. Weiss looked on as her daughter put the last finishing touches to her ensemble. 'Ida had given her no clue as to where the wedding was to take place. She itched with curiosity.

"I suppose," she said, "you wouldn't want mamma to come, dear?"

"How right you are," said Ida. "You bet your life I wouldn't want mamma to come. This wedding's going to be quiet. I guess we're going to spring a surprise on everybody. Just the three of us—Mr. Dunne, Mr. Brindle, and me."

A pause. Then:

"Ida."

"I'm listening."

"I want you always to believe that I did everything for the best. For the—huh—happiness of my little baby."

Ida swivelled an ironic eye. "Do you want me to vomit? Cut out the maudlin stuff."

"Really, Ida——"

"Aw, snap out of it. Be your age. There's something on your mind, isn't there?"

"No, Ida. Only that. That I want you to believe that I did everything for the best. I guess Mr. Dunne might let something slip. I guess maybe that one of these days, when you're talking things over——"

"Don't worry, Mrs. Weiss dear," said Ida. "There'll never be any occasion to talk things over. Mr. Dunne and I understand each other."

Mrs. Weiss gently blew her nose. Her eyes were moist. She said:

"You look so nice, Ida, I've never seen you look so swell. This is a very happy day for me."

"Make the most of it," advised Ida. "Happiness never did last."

There was a knock at the door. Albert Sims spoke through the aperture.

"Beg pardon, madam. Mr. Dunne asked me to tell you that the boat was alongside."

Through the porthole Mrs. Weiss watched them embark. No gaiety here. The party of three wore a most singular solemnity. Mr. Brindle in particular looked like a man going to a funeral. Mrs. Weiss watched them out of sight. Then, taking the will from underneath the contents of her drawer, she tore it into little pieces, placed them in a paper bag, and went to the galley.

"Oh, chef," she said. "I wonder if you'd burn this for me? Do you mind?"

CHAPTER THIRTY

A Parting and a Meeting

1

OVER THE SHOP of Chung-Soo in the cloth bazaar there was a three-roomed flat, and in this flat Captain Sale's Madeleine greeted him with fervour. Indescribably tiny, she crawled all over him in the chair like an ecstatic little puppy, snuffing up the tobacco smell, the bay rum smell, and the smell of eau-de-Cologne on his handkerchief. And, also like a puppy, she bit his nose, she bit his ear, she caressed him with her tongue indiscriminately. The Captain laughed, and fought her off.

"Belay there," he cried, "hold up. Give me air."

Finally, her transports abating, she sat on a pouffé and stared at him.

"La la," she said, "it ees the same so-beeg Captain. Why did you not come before? All zis time I wait, and am so mceserable. Why have you not come to me? You 'ave been busy wiz ze ozers—*n'est ce pas?*"

"What others?"

"Ze ozer gairls. A switheart in every port, no? Ah, zut! You are a bad man, Captain. And you 'ave bad manners also. He comes, he sits, he does not ask me how I do with myself. *Attendez*. Do I not look very sharming?"

"You're a bundle of delight," he assured her.

"So. And you—you are always ze same. Strong, wiz ze beeg legs and ze red face. And you bring me no hair on your head? Did you not tell me it would grow?"

"It's no go, Madeleine."

"I knew it. And now here you are in zis flat. I cannot believe. I must touch you once more. A year? Eighteen

months? It has been very long, very *triste*. And Madeleine has been very good. She burn two—three candles for her so-nize Captain."

Captain Sale had just poured himself out a whisky when a buzzer sounded in the room.

"So. Excuse. A customer comes."

Madeleine ran out, leaving the door open. From where he sat Captain Sale could see some old prints on the landing, and he went out to look at them. But, instead of examining the prints, he began to move swiftly down the carpeted stairs. The voice of Albert Sims was well known to him. And wasn't that other the voice of Mr. Puckle? Gently, he turned the handle of the door at the bottom, eased it without a sound. Mr. Puckle said:

"Yes, I know, miss. But we want Chung Soo. This is an important deal. These here miniatures are worth big money. 'Chung Soo himself arranged to buy them back for three thousand pounds."

"So," said Madeleine. "You do not think I am capable? *Attendez*, m'sieur. You see all zis picture? I buy most of zem myself. I 'ave full power to act for Chung Soo. You 'ave some miniatures to sell?"

There was a rustle of paper, a silence. Then, from Madeleine:

"Ze Chanyu miniatures."

"That's right," said Mr. Puckle. "Chanyu, that's the name."

"Zat," allowed Madeleine, "is ze name. But zese are not ze pictures. One moment. I can refer to ze ledger."

Throughout a long pause Captain Sale waited, breathing quietly. Then: " "

"But yes. Here is ze record of ze transaction. M'sieu Chung Soo bought ze Chanyu miniatures from a M'sieu Harriwell, of England, on May seventeenth nineteen twenty-six."

"Then, for Chrisake," said Mr. Puckle, desperately, "what are these?"

"Zosc," said Madelcine, "are copies, m'sieu. And zey are very poor copies—I can allow you only twenty pounds."

2

With an unseeing eye Mr. Wix observed the procession of Afghans, Sikhs, Tibetans, Cingalese, and Baghdad Jews past the windows of the Baroda Restaurant. Herbert French was seeing the sights of Bombay. Kay and Mr. Wix sat alone. She passed the letter over to him.

"It's a lovely letter, Wixy," she said. "He must be a dear old man."

"I've ridden him pretty hard," muttered Mr. Wix. "He's never had anything but trouble from me."

He looked at his watch. "The plane leaves at four o'clock. That gives me two hours. Now listen to me, my dear. I want you to be sensible about this. I'll never get through that money, I'll never live to spend it. The specialist gave me no option. Either I quit fooling about or I pay the penalty. He didn't exactly put a limit to my life, but he did warn me that I was playing a dangerous game. And I can't quit. It isn't just a matter of will-power, or courage. Call it possession, if you like, and leave it at that. Shall I order another coffee?"

Mr. Wix signalled the waiter.

"Very well. That's that. I've got no relatives alive, not a single one. God knows what's to become of the estate when I hand in my checks. And I'd like you to benefit. I've never felt for any woman what I feel about you, my dear. Now don't be silly about this. Nobody admires independence more than I do, but it can be carried too far."

"Very well, Wixy. It shall be as you wish."

"Good. We'll keep in touch, of course."

"I should consider you very wicked if you didn't."

"I may have said some rather outrageous things to you when I was tight."

"No, not outrageous. Any woman might have been pleased to hear them, Wixy. You were very nice. Things will be dreary without you. This trip has fallen rather desperately flat for me."

Mr. Wix faintly smiled. "That's very nice of you, my dear. It's good to think that I shall be missed. Will you write me a letter?"

"Need you ask?"

"And when you come home I'll meet you at the docks, D.V. I'll arrange a nice little dinner. It's going to be a grand friendship."

"Friendship? Wixy, will you think I'm immodest if I——"

Mr. Wix laid a firm hand over hers on the table. "Don't, my dear. I'm no good. I never was any good, not to anybody. There have been dozens of women—scores of them. And not one has got anything to thank me for. It seems to me that this has been a pretty gloomy session. I think we'll go out, shall we? Have a look at Bombay. Will you see me off?"

She couldn't answer him with words. Somehow, she twisted her lips to a smile.

3

Outside the shop of Chung Soo Mr. Puckle turned a cold eye on Albert Sims.

"Beat it," he said, "you little bum. It gives me the willies to look at your flat face. And if ever I run up against you in a quiet corner one of these days I'll lambast the daylights outta you." Mr. Puckle made a threatening movement. "Beat it!" he snarled.

Mr. Puckle had left his baggage at the shipping office, and thither he now repaired, carrying with him a cold hatred of all mankind and a sick disgust of himself. He booked himself a third-class passage to New York on the liner *George Washington*, took a taxi down to the water-

front, embarked himself in a small motor-boat, and was borne away. Rounding the quarters of the liner, looking ahead to the voyage home, he perked up somewhat. The bad dream was fading, and the hope of plenty was increasing moment by moment.

"Hell!" he said to himself, "there's plenty of jack in the world, and you've always managed to break even. I guess you'll make a big comeback presently, old Puckle. Yes, I guess maybe you'll be in the big money before you can turn around."

With this heartening reflection he climbed the accommodation ladder of the *George Washington*, and followed the steward down to his cabin. The door closed behind him. Alone, he stared out of the porthole at the *Aphrodite* with distaste. He thought of Mr. Wix, of Mrs. Weiss, of Albert Sims, and of all the unpleasantness that had dogged him since leaving England.

"You're no damn good," he muttered viciously. "I ain't had a nice day outta you since I shipped at Portsmouth."

And then, thinking of Miss Letts, Mr. Puckle's face softened to a pensive smile. Cute little Jane that, he thought. You never know what might have happened if you'd made a big pass at her.

He shook his head, chuckled softly. Raising his glance once more to the yacht, he pursed his lips, and blew a kiss.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

At Sea

1

"IDA!"

Mrs. Weiss, alone in her cabin, rose hastily as her daughter closed the door behind her. Her heart, as they

say, was full. This was the crowning moment of her life, and her eyes brimmed with affection.

"My daughter," she cried, "my married daughter!"

Ida kept her away with a long arm. "Lay off," she said grimly. She was flushed, her eyes glittered curiously, and she gave off a strong bouquet of champagne. She sat down.

"Well, momma darling," she said, "how're you feeling?"

"Oh, Ida, I'm so happy. I could just cry with happiness. And now you shall tell momma how everything went off. I'm just bursting to hear."

"So you're good and happy," was Ida's comment. "I guess that's fine. But it isn't going to last, Mrs. Weiss dear. I'm going to talk turkey to you, I'm going to tell you just what's on my mind, and that's plenty. I never did think you were genuine, I guess I always thought you were a hypocrite, and now I know I was right."

Mrs. Weiss blinked. She looked stung, and just a little frightened. She said:

"Ida—you're not yourself, honey. Mind you, I quite understand. I guess one's apt to let oneself go at a wedding with—huh—the champagne. You drink it down, you just don't notice, and—you see what I mean, Ida? And, of course, it's excusable. I wouldn't dream of—but, don't you think you'd better lie down for a while?"

"You drink it down," nodded Ida, "you just don't notice. I noticed all right. I counted four glasses, and a glass of brandy. If you think I'm mad drunk, that's O.K. with me. I'm not that drunk I don't know what I'm saying, anyway. And I know just what kind of a chiseller I'm looking at, too."

Her mother winced, was suddenly pale.

"This is monstrous," she said. "That my own child should insult——"

"I'll say it's monstrous," put in Ida, harshly. "I wonder you've got the nerve to hold your head up. Where's that will? The will you were going to hand over to Mr. Dunne all in a hurry. The will you tucked into your stocking as

soon as you got outside this door. I can see now that I ought to have known, I never should have let you handle it. Well, I guess I didn't just expect trickery and cunning and double-dealing from my own mother. Where is it?"

"I—it's burnt, Ida. I saw the chef burn it with my own eyes." Her voice rose in desperation. "Ida. Listen. You must listen to me. What I did was for you, it was for your——"

"Be silent!" Ida's voice rang like a cymbal. Loathing filled her eyes as she looked at her mother. "You're not just a snob, you're not just a hypocrite—you're phoney, you're a crook."

Mrs. Weiss began to whimper. "This is Mr. Dunne's doing. I thought I could trust him, I thought he was a gentleman. I thought——"

"You're wrong," interrupted Ida. "It's my doing. I saw a message in the wireless log from Crumley and Harris of London. And then I went to Mr. Dunne and dragged the whole story out of him, to my shame. Shame?" Ida choked. "I guess I couldn't look that guy in the face. And when I look at you, I guess there's something comes up in my mouth like bile. Delilah was treacherous, I'll tell the world, but she's still got to put over a couple of fast ones to catch up with Mrs. Weiss."

Mrs. Weiss gave a moan. The tears streamed down her face; she blubbered like a child.

"Ida. My child. You can't leave me like this. I shall be ill. You're distraught, you don't know what you're saying, you——"

"I know what I'm saying, all right," put in Ida, wrathfully, "and at that I haven't said the half if it. Distraught?" She gave a bitter laugh. "Right now I'm that distraught I can hardly keep my hands off you. I used to think your 'snob complex' was amusing, I used to think it was just a kink that I had to be tolerant of. Well, I can see now that you're a case, you need a psycho-analyst to give you a good clean-up."

Ida swept to the door, swung around with the magnificent motion of a young fury.

"And now," she said, "I've got a piece of news for you. I'm married. But not the way you think. At three o'clock this afternoon I was married to Mr. Brindle."

In the silence that followed her mother turned white to the lips. And then, with a shriek, she gave tongue.

"Ida! No! It isn't true."

Suddenly she slumped down in the chair, her limbs slack, her head lolling. And Ida, splashing her with cold water, loosening her corsets, was all at once filled with a sense of pity at the pathetic spectacle of this fat, elderly woman brought to helplessness and final defeat.

"Poor Mrs. Weiss dear," she murmured. "I guess this has done you good, I guess maybe you'll be livcable in a year or so."

2

Slowly the motor-boat went ahead in a widening curve, leaving the *Aphrodite* behind. Mrs. Weiss sat in the stern sheets and waved to her daughter through a mist of tears. Mrs. Weiss was crushed. Much of her haughtiness had disappeared; she looked like a woman bereaved of her dearest possession, which indeed she was. For had she not possessed for a while—at least in her mind—the glory of a thoroughbred son-in-law? She waved again, listless, and the tears renewed themselves. They were tears of self-pity, of extreme mortification, the tears of a woman who had tasted brief bliss only to have it snatched away.

Nothing, no consideration in the world would have induced her to remain on board the yacht. Nor would she accept the unwelcome present of Mr. Brindle. Having packed, she had remained in her cabin until the boat was alongside waiting to float her away from what had suddenly become a purgatory. No good-byes, not even a farewell glance at her fellow-passengers. She had let it be known

that she had received a grave shock, that her state would not permit of personal contacts.

"You will tell the others," she had said to Albert Sims, "that I don't feel equal to meeting anyone. I wish to leave as quietly as possible. And will you say my good-byes for me, steward?"

3

The lights of Bombay faded out astern. The *Aphrodite*, rocked gently on the bosom of a docile sea, moved ahead at a steady ten knots. Under the awning five deck-chairs were disposed. One of them, lonely by the starboard davits, contained Ada Letts.

Travel, it has been said, broadens the mind. However this may be, it certainly improves the vision. And Ada Letts, who had been looking backwards at the person of her fiancé ever since he had raised his correct umbrella in a farewell salute at the station, now saw that four hundred pounds' worth of luxury cruising had certainly saved her from a lifetime of unhappiness. Arthur Shedley was definitely not the man for Ada Letts. She had posted a letter in Bombay telling him so, and setting forth her reasons. And it had occurred to her whilst she was writing it that four hundred pounds was simply a laughable figure to pay for the knowledge that this was the last time she would ever correspond with Arthur.

And now, relieved of one encumbrance, she longed for another. Even Mr. Puckle had known how to roll a playful eye on occasions. She missed him. He was, at all events, male, and easy to flirt with. And just now, she was conscious of the other four deck-chairs, grouped in pairs, a little apart from each other, with their occupants sitting very close together in the enfolding darkness: two lovers giving out faint murmurs, two newly-weds floating soft laughter to the ears of the envious virgin.

Ida. Mr. Brindle was getting used to the sound of the

name as pronounced by his own voice. And Ted. He was getting used to wifely familiarity. But he had yet to get used to his new state of happiness, and he had not yet altogether lost the feeling of awe which came over him when he considered the adventures of the marriage-bed which still lay in wait for his unadventurous soul. Meantime he was dazed; he was like a patient suffering from operational shock. To be apprized in the motor-boat that he was about to become a husband by a determined young woman had been shock number one.

"Mr. Brindle," Ida had said, "you're going to marry me. That O.K.?"

To say that he was stupefied was to put it mildly. He looked not merely perplexed, his face presented the blank simplicity of a village idiot.

"Me? You didn't say——"

Ida grew impatient. "Don't you want to?" she demanded. And her scowl was something to be remembered. As for her eyes—well, Mr. Brindle thought that fierceness suited them.

Did he want to?

She didn't wait for his answer; not in words, at all events, for Mr. Brindle was at the moment incapable of mentioning any. The thing had burst upon him with all the beauty and all the suddenness of coloured stars shooting from a rocket.

And now, sitting in a deck-chair with the lights of Bombay receding into a past made indescribably lovely by present company, Mr. Brindle walked with the uncertain steps of a toddler into a future thick with happy novelties. He had, of course, elected to do his duty as first officer to the end of his voyage. Beyond that . . .

Well, beyond that he simply couldn't go. It seemed to him that he had been caught up into some preposterous fairy-tale; the whole of his seaman's life had been turned topsy-turvy, and the events leading up to his presence in this chair by the side of Mrs. Brindle had been completely

fantastic. No, he couldn't cope with things. Content to live each moment as it came, he lay back and savoured the taste of bliss.

Suddenly he chuckled.

"Mrs. Brindle," he explained. "I was thinking about it, saying it to myself. It made me laugh."

And then Ida laughed in her turn. "I guess it didn't make you laugh when I broke the news in the motor-boat," she said. "What did you feel like?"

Mr. Brindle thought about it for a while. "I don't know. At least, I can't describe it. Sort of transformed. Do you remember the chap in the Bible who ascended to heaven in a chariot of fire? If he felt anything like I did he was lucky."

Ida reached out for his hand. She said:

"I guess you're kind of slow, Ted Brindle," she said. "Do you think I'm going to be grabbing for your hand all the while? It's the man's job to make love to his woman. Or don't you know how?"

And after a slight pause, with another chuckle, she added:

"Don't worry, Ted. I'll teach you . . . dear."

Lady Eleanor sighed as she moved in Dunne's arm.

"A dark stranger," she murmured. "A foreign land. That's what they tell everybody, and that's what the gipsy told me. And in my case it's come true."

"Once," said Dunne, "I was in love."

"Lucky woman," said Lady Eleanor.

"Not a woman. A ship. And now——"

"Off with the old? You'll have regrets, my dear."

"No regrets. I'll have happy memories, and you. That is——"

"Yes?"

"I never did formally propose, did I, Eleanor?"

"Didn't you? Never mind, darling. Just take me for granted. I *knew* this was going to be an exciting voyage, ever since the omen."

"What omen?"

"Don't you remember? The bowler hat and the melancholy moustache. Poor man. He looked so unhappy."

Save for the whisper of the fan, everything was quiet in the saloon. Absorbed in the pages of a book, secure in the knowledge that stolen property had been restored, Herbert French was at peace. Kay French, seated at the table, stared at her notepaper with its embossed heading in blue: *S.Y. Aphrodite*. Underneath it she wrote: *At Sea*. For a moment or two a smile played about her lips as she considered that first morning, which now seemed so far away.

"Oh, no," Mr. Wix was saying, "not private. Just a thought. How lucky to be a butterfly."

And then, shaking her pen on the blotter, she began to write.

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